The Woman Behind the Witch’s Mask

The Evolution of the Female Villain in Literature

From Shakespeare to the Present

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by

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**Introduction**

*When bad women get into literature, what are they doing there, and are they permissible, and what, if anything, do we need them for?*

Margaret Atwood, in a 1994 lecture  (Aguiar 1)

Female villains permeate Western literature. From Eve in the Garden of Eden to Cinderella’s wicked stepmother, these women are easily recognizable and often fall into predictable patterns. While these ideas are a part of our literary consciousness, very little study has been conducted on female villains as a group. The *Oxford Book of Villains*, a collection of evildoers from canonical works in English, lists few females. Eight women are mentioned in the chapter entitled “Murderers,” which seems to be the most profligate category of villains. Strangely, this potentially villainous gender has gone overlooked by scholars. Female villains are an extremely important aspect of our literary tradition. The inclusion of a female villain can tell a reader the author’s views about his or her society. The reader can imagine herself out of an imprisoning life by reading about a woman who acts outside of social boundaries. Before a study can be conducted on the concept of the female villain, one must first examine the nature of villains in literature as a whole.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “villain” first appeared in print in 1303. The word is derived from the Anglo-French word *villein*, which denoted a peasant in the feudal system, as well as a person who was crude and rustic. The word *villein* itself comes from the Italian *villa*, a small town or a farm. The word would probably have started to become a kind of slander or insult just as a person might call
someone “low” or “provincial” today. Over the centuries, the word changed to villain and began to mean a kind of scoundrel who was unprincipled and naturally disposed to committing crimes. It is interesting to note that the term villain was used early on as a playful term for a wily woman. The word did not come to mean the antagonist in a work of fiction or drama until the nineteenth century, with the rising popularity of the melodrama. A “villain” has now come to mean a character whose evil intent and actions have consequences for the protagonist. In the simplest of stories, the protagonist must overcome these consequences in order to become a better person. In much of Western literature, however, the villain becomes a complex character whose evil deeds are not always presented in black and white. Whether or not a character’s actions are truly villainous is up to the reader, his or her time, and his or her perspective to decide. What is problematic about the word villain is its association with the cartoonish evildoers twirling their mustaches in melodramatic theater of the nineteenth century. While it may not be the best term to use to describe these evil women in literature, there is no other word in our language that accurately conveys their role.

Of course, villains are fictional characters. Certainly the work that an author creates often reflects real issues and problems in his or her society. When an author creates a female villain, that author is consciously choosing to make the villain female. What are the authors of female villains seeking to communicate? What causes these characters to be villainous? Are they lashing out against oppression? Or are they simply finding that the only way they can be unconventional is to go directly against convention, in often a violent manner?
The idea of a villain in literature is in itself problematic. What defines a villain? Must it be an act of murder? Or can it be a woman who leaves her family because she is unhappy in her domestic role? In gendering the nature of the villain, one comes across many other issues. The Victorians believed a villainous woman was one who abandoned her specific role in society. For example, Thomas Hardy’s Tess Durbeyfield is considered villainous for killing the man who raped her and subsequently ruined her life. Modern authors such as Margaret Atwood have sought to create a new definition of a female villain, suggesting that a villainous nature lies dormant in every woman. Carl Jung believed that “the evil woman is one who is dominated by male motives” (Aguiar 3). Does a female villain, then, take on male characteristics? Is this the only way she can be accepted as evil? Are women intrinsically good, and only men possess evil tendencies? Must all Lady Macbeths be “unsexed” in order to perform evil deeds? Female villains seem to have their own methods of evil separate from men. Chris Willis notes that unlike male villains, female villains are often sexually attractive, and can use this as a weapon (57). The female villains in the works in this study are not simply pure evil. They are all rational characters that have clear motives. This makes it harder to dismiss them as just the “bad guys.” This is why this kind of study may be necessary. If we can reveal how our society creates and perceives its villains, it can aid us to better understand our values and ourselves.

In looking at female villains from a modern perspective, a modern method of literary criticism is necessary. Among its many accomplishments for women, the Feminist Movement of the twentieth century largely sought to emancipate both the
traditionally female character in literature as well as her persona in the literary canon. This commenced a closer examination of literature from the feminist perspective. I wish to take this perspective and apply it to the female villains in literature, from the seventeenth century to the present. This theory will allow a study of each individual villain in relation to her society and surroundings, as well as the influences on the author who created her. I am treating these texts as products of the times in which they were written. This would of course affect the way an author chose to present a female villain, and what also would have made that female villainous. I will examine, through the texts, how each society viewed gender and gender roles and how each author chose to interpret those views.

I explored many works in the literary canon in which a female villain appears. I studied the works chronologically, while searching for patterns and changes over time. I have chosen to define a “villain” as simply as possible: as a character who deliberately opposes the protagonist. I created a “villain sequence,” which all villains in literature follow more or less:

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<tr>
<th>Villain’s Motive</th>
<th>Villainous Action</th>
<th>Consequences for Protagonist</th>
<th>Consequences for Villain</th>
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The plot of a story begins by giving the villain’s motive for her villainy. This motive leads the villain to commit a crime or action against the protagonist, which leads to consequences for the protagonist. The crime must be punished, and the end of the narrative includes consequences for the villain. Using this basic outline, I looked at the female villains of several centuries, paying special attention their motives and the result of their crimes. In most cases, the villain is defeated and the protagonists live “happily
ever after.” But it is also evident that the lives of the protagonists are greatly affected by the villain’s actions. A villain is central to the action, and a female villain requires a closer look.

Through extensive research and reflection, I am proposing a kind of theory of “bad” women and the villains that they develop into in so much of Western literature. Until the late twentieth century, women were not allowed to legally wield any kind of strong power, whether that power was economic, physical, political or social. For women, power lay in their quiet, peaceful homes and the love they were expected to give unconditionally to their husbands and children. Many women would not have chosen this life if they had been given a choice. Some unique women, however, realized there was a choice to be made. They could choose to remain within their passive, powerless positions, or they could create a new kind of life. This life would not have been widely accepted. A good example is prostitution. Prostitution was both an economic and social outlet for many women, who were able to interact freely with men and the outside world. This lifestyle would never have been viewed as moral in Western society, but it was an outlet for some women.

The women in the works presented in this study rebel against society and their accepted roles by acting wickedly. A woman was expected to always be good, pure, and selfless, but must have known intrinsically that was naturally impossible. Although women were expected to be angelic, they must have realized that they were not born with entirely angelic personalities. Unfortunately, bad women seem to have no role except that of the villain. Rather than choosing to be a demon over an angel, I believe that
female villains instead choose to embrace their true humanity. When a woman acts “badly” she is simply bringing out a natural part of herself that has been suppressed. She manifests this as anger towards a society that forbids her to be her true and natural self. In order to live a contented life, there must be a balance of the two halves of this self. If the “bad” half is denied as part of the true self, it will eventually surface. These females, who have never known true power, find their surfacing evil selves to be stimulating in ways they had never experienced. This “hidden half” of themselves, when realized, makes the women so needy for power that they are transformed into villains.
1. “Unsex me here:” Ambition Becomes Lady Macbeth

Shakespeare himself may have had a grasp on this concept of the “double self” within every woman. In the first scene of his play *Macbeth*, eerie witches chant the line, “Fair is foul and foul is fair,” (Shakespeare I. i. 11). This theme echoes throughout the play, and refers to the deceiving appearances of locations and characters within it. The ambitious, conniving Lady Macbeth is a perfect example of the catastrophe that occurs when a woman’s two halves become unbalanced.

*Macbeth* is viewed as one of Shakespeare’s great tragedies. The editor of the 1973 edition of Scott, Foresman and Company’s *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* defines *Macbeth* as “an intensely human psychological study of the effects of evil on a particular man and, to a lesser extent, his wife” (Craig 1043). Many Shakespearean critics have studied the relationship between Macbeth and his wife, and several have taken on the task of studying solely Lady Macbeth and her unique role in the play. Lynn Veach Sadler observed that there seem to be two critical views of Lady Macbeth; some critics believe she is less interesting and imaginative than Macbeth, while the other group sees her as a domineering female who goads her husband into action with her powerful words (Sadler 10). I wish to defend the latter view, examining Lady Macbeth in her role as a villain, and whether or not she is a successful and convincing one.

Lady Macbeth certainly seems to fit the definition of a villain. From the onset, she appears likely to commit great crimes, or, at least, she wishes to. There really is not a protagonist or hero to oppose, however. The play is titled after her husband, who is
Lady Macbeth does not plant the seeds of ambition within her husband; she merely seems to nurture what is already there. We first meet Lady Macbeth towards the end of the first act, in a famous scene that critics continue to dispute. The witches’ predictions have been made and have already begun to come true. Lady Macbeth receives a summary of these events through a letter from her husband, in which he addresses her as “my dearest partner of greatness” (I. v. 12-13). Macbeth recognizes his wife as his equal. She is his partner, not his subordinate. “Greatness” may suggest the goal the two share, that of gaining control of the kingdom. In the letter, Macbeth tells his wife everything. If she is his partner, she must know everything that occurs in her husband’s rise to power. Lady Macbeth finishes reading the letter, and begins to worry about her husband’s personality as a roadblock to their success: “…I do fear thy nature; It is too full o’ the milk of human kindness/ To catch the nearest way” (17-19). One would assume that Macbeth might think this about his wife, rather than the reverse. A female might normally be labeled as too kind to take a chance as it comes. And yet it is Lady Macbeth who worries that her husband may be the one who is too “soft.” Irene K. Dash argues, that although Macbeth is the one to “see” the various visions, perhaps Lady Macbeth does not see too clearly herself. Isn’t Macbeth, after all, due to return from a bloody battle, in which “his brandish’d steel,/…smok’d with bloody execution” (I. ii. 17-18)? While Macbeth does project the image of heroism in the beginning of the play, his nature does not seem especially kind or merciful (Dash 160). Therefore, perhaps Lady
Macbeth is wrong to think her husband is too “kind” to murder the king. To prevent any remorse he may have, Lady Macbeth tells herself she will encourage her husband to do whatever he can to succeed, “And chastise with the valour of my tongue/ All that impedes thee from the golden round” (I. v. 28-29). If Macbeth has doubts, which his wife suspects, she will be firm in dismantling them.

Lady Macbeth is aware that she and her husband will have to use dishonest and cruel means to make Macbeth king. She believes that a feminine woman cannot perform these deeds successfully. She armors herself for them by pushing out her femininity:

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood;
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose…
Come to my woman’s breasts,
And take my milk for gall… (I. v. 41-49).

Lady Macbeth knows that a typically feminine nature is non-violent, thus the spirits she calls to must strip away her femininity. She wants to be filled with evil, not weak or remorseful feminine thoughts and feelings. She wants no “visitings of nature,” perhaps referring to a natural feminine instinct or even menstruation. Referring back to her accusation that Macbeth himself is too full of “the milk of human kindness,” perhaps Lady Macbeth thinks that she herself is the one who is full of it, and thus she begs the spirits to take her milk (Lenz 245). She may also see her breasts as clear evidence of her femininity, and must disguise them so she can seem more masculine. Shakespeare’s view of a female villain, then, is one who is quite unfeminine. It may have been difficult for his audiences to believe a feminine female could be a villain, and so he may have
taken pains to show this dismantling of femininity. She tells her husband to “…look like th’ innocent flower,” (I. v. 66), demanding he take on a more feminine role. Lady Macbeth takes full charge of the situation as well. She tells her husband, whom she notices looks clearly suspicious, “Leave all the rest to me” (75). She is able to take the leading role, now that she has de-feminized herself.

Two scenes later, Macbeth tells the audience that he knows it is wrong to murder Duncan, and knows it is his own “vaulting ambition” (I. vii. 28) that will lead him to do the deed. His wife enters and, seeing his hesitations, gives him encouragement. She convinces him to commit the murder:

Wouldst thou have that  
Which thou esteem’st the ornament of life,  
And live a coward in thy own esteem,  
Letting ‘I dare not’ wait upon ‘I would’? (41-4).

She reminds him of his ambition, but also chides him for being weak and cowardly. She threatens his very manhood, and thus encourages his devious plan. She can easily badger her husband for his failure to live up to the standard that she, a mere woman, has set (Pitt 48). Macbeth admires this behavior, and tells his wife, “Bring forth men-children only;/ For thy undaunted mettle should compose/ Nothing but males” (I. vii. 72-4). He sees there is little that is traditionally feminine about her – only male children would become her nature. And yet this is ironic. She is brought into the world of males only as a breeder of male children, a uniquely feminine task (Dash 170).

Lady Macbeth does not simply goad her husband into murdering the king, but goes along to help. She even admits, “Had [Duncan] not resembled/ My father as he slept, I had done’t” (II. ii. 13-4). Although a few lines earlier she had announced how
bold and full of fire she felt after the deed, she wouldn’t murder the king herself. (Of course, the murder of the king by Macbeth makes for a better turn of events). This also reveals another feminine aspect of Lady Macbeth’s character – she feels tender, familial feelings for Duncan, and it is these feminine feelings that prevent her from murdering him. She may have requested to be unsexed, but she has not achieved that (Lenz 245).

After the murder, Macbeth begins to hear voices and believes he sees visions. Lady Macbeth, the clearer-sighted of the two, tells him, “You do unbend your noble strength, to think/ So brainsickly of things. Go get some water/ And wash this filthy witness from your hand” (45-7). She is continually the one who coaxes her husband into action. After they wash off the blood, she exclaims, “A little water clears us of this deed:/ How easy is it, then!” (67-8). Lady Macbeth seems villainously guilt-free.

When the murder is discovered, and Lady Macbeth enters to innocently ask what is going on, Macduff tells her, “’Tis not for you to hear what I can speak:/ The repetition, in a woman’s ear,/ Would murder as it fell” (II. iii. 89-91). Macduff does not know that Lady Macbeth herself had a literal hand in this murder, and its news would not be too delicate for her not-so-feminine ears. Although she was a party to the murder, she is shielded by Macduff from the male world of violence and war and thus is pushed back into the feminine world (Lenz 246). Macbeth begins to rant openly, and Lady Macbeth faints suddenly. For hundreds of years, Lady Macbeth was omitted from the staging of this scene due to the ambiguity of her actions (Dash 173). Some critics believe she faints to quiet Macbeth and distract his listeners, which, from a villain’s standpoint, is plausible. Although Lady Macbeth shows signs of guilt later in the play, she is strong and
undaunted at this point. She has made such a point of being unfeminine that fainting seems too weak and womanly for her. Gary Wills argues that although she attempted to unsex herself, the murder and the events surrounding it were too much for her, and Lady Macbeth faints from shock and exhaustion (Wills 84). False or not, fainting does symbolize weakness and is a very typically feminine thing to do. It succeeds in removing Lady Macbeth from the central events of the play as well (Lenz 247). She is no longer the strong leader of the pair, and has lost much of her powerful motivations. She tells Macbeth, still suffering from guilt and visions an act later, “…what’s done is done” (III. ii. 12). And yet when she asks him what they should do next, he will not tell her about his plan to murder Banquo: “Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,/ Till thou applaud the deed” (45-6). She is no longer his “partner in greatness,” but has been degraded to a woman’s role. Whether or not Macbeth is trying to protect her from further guilt, or simply does not trust anyone, he has removed his wife from all villainous action.

Removed from the central action, both by Macbeth and by Shakespeare, Lady Macbeth is left alone to ponder the murder. Throughout the play, Lady Macbeth chided her husband for his guilt and his weakness. She herself does not show any guilt until late in the play. The audience first hears of her condition from a doctor, who reports that she is sleepwalking, and rubbing her hands together as if washing them. These are the only true “visions” she sees in the play, and unlike Macbeth’s visions of a supernatural nature, she is haunted by past events (Lenz 250). Where previously, a little water rinsed Lady Macbeth of her guilt, she is now troubled by the memory (and the present, figurative truth) of Duncan’s blood on her hands. “…all the/ perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten
this little hand” (V. i. 57-8). In her guilt, Lady Macbeth feminizes herself by mentioning her small hands and perfume. In her rantings, she appears to be speaking to Macbeth. She cannot separate the crime from him, and continues to give him direction. Her visible remorse takes away from her arresting villainy. In a way, she is paying a price for the deed she had a hand in, and her villainy is punished.

Is Lady Macbeth, then, a true villain? She quests for evil, and yet once the evil has been committed (and not by her), she experiences guilt and remorse to the extent of suicide. She believes that to succeed as a villain, she must unsex herself, and yet does not succeed in her self-defeminization. She is her husband’s partner only up to a point, and then she is abandoned as helper and accomplice. She never really benefits from the murder of Duncan – she is continually fighting her husband’s war she is fighting. And yet she fights for him and never questions their motives. She is a truly supportive wife, one who wishes to aid her husband’s success in any means possible, perhaps because there is nothing else for her. If she had resisted Macbeth’s plan to murder the king, she might have been excluded from his life entirely, as she is in the second half of the play. While her evil in the beginning cannot evoke any feeling from the audience, I believe she becomes more sympathetic in her guilt.

Whether or not Lady Macbeth is successful in her quest toward true villainy, she nevertheless succeeds in breaking several stereotypes of women in Shakespeare’s time. Shakespeare’s contemporaries either idealized women as pure protectors of the home and the family or satirized them as scolding shrews, fools, or whores (Pitt 41). In Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare creates a new type of woman: she is strong-minded and capable of
existing, if only for a while, on equal footing with her husband. She is never as “unsexed” as she wants to be. Perhaps she believes her femininity is tied solely to her body, and she may then achieve this “unsexing” by killing herself (Lenz 250). As a woman created in the seventeenth century, Lady Macbeth cannot realize that as a woman she is not necessarily intrinsically “good.” She does not need to strip away her femininity in order to act unlike the feminine ideal. It would take several more centuries for female villains to come to terms with this idea. While Lady Macbeth cannot commit murder herself and feels guilty for the deeds, she remains an arresting figure. She is unique and well-rounded, and I believe Shakespeare did well to create a strong female role, even if she herself was unable to fulfill her plea and escape from her femininity.

2. *A Symbol of Mercantilist Discord: Millwood in The London Merchant*

Not many female villains exist between Shakespeare’s time in the early seventeenth century and the nineteenth century. Readers in this period may have argued differently, however. Certainly a character like Eve in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* may have been viewed as villainous for her ability to cause the fall of man. Sexually free women, like those in William Wycherley’s popular play *The Country Wife*, as well as “fallen” women in more tragic stories would continue to be viewed as villainous until the twentieth century. Numerous tracts existed which discouraged women from becoming religious or political leaders. The world was changing; a bourgeois middle class was beginning to grow from an emerging mercantilist society, and theater audiences were demanding works that focused on common people like themselves (Freeman 542). A
work that provides evidence of and closely examines this changing world is *The London Merchant: or, The History of George Barnwell*, a tragedy by George Lillo, originally performed in 1731. The play is the first example of “bourgeois tragedy,” focusing on this new social class, who Lillo believed not only worthy of attention but also cultural legitimacy (Hynes 1). Lillo’s play enjoyed a long-lived theatrical success, and attracted audiences of all classes (Wallace 124).

The play, which Lillo adapted from many sources, depicts the downfall of a merchant’s apprentice at the hands of a greedy prostitute. The prologue tells the audience that this will be “a moral tale” (Lillo, Prologue 24). George Barnwell is an apprentice to Thorowgood, a successful merchant in Elizabethan England. Barnwell is seduced by Sarah Millwood, a prostitute greedy for wealth, and falls so in love with her that he robs his master and kills his uncle to bring money to her. Barnwell and Millwood are both hanged at the end of the play, Barnwell for his murder and Millwood for her avarice and seduction of him.

From her introduction into the play, Millwood is shown to be very conniving, an embodiment of vice and temptation. She tells her servant Lucy of her customers, “…we can take advantage only of the young and innocent part of the sex who, having never injured women, apprehend no injury from them” (I. iii. 38-41). She knows that Barnwell, being innocent and impressionable, will be easy to snare. She continually lies to him about her economic status so Barnwell will supply her with funds. Blinded by his love, Barnwell feels forced to steal from Thorowgood, his master, when his own funds are reduced. Millwood also preys on his pity, gaining his support by telling him false stories
of maltreatment and poverty. She tells Lucy, in front of Barnwell, “…since for he whose dear sake alone I suffer, and am content to suffer, is kind and pities me. Where’er I wander through wilds and deserts, benighted and forlorn, that thought shall give me comfort” (II. xi. 19-22). Millwood feeds Barnwell images of her walking alone in remote localities, “benighted and forlorn,” which, as she notes, gains Barnwell’s pity. Of course the plights she relates to him are all false, and crafted to gain his pity.

When Millwood’s avarice leads her to encourage Barnwell to kill his wealthy uncle, he “called her ‘cruel, monster, devil,’ and told her she was born for his destruction” (III. iv. 62-3). He is aware she is villainous, and yet Millwood’s hold on Barnwell is too strong. She is ultimately able to convince him to do the deed: “She’s got such firm possession of my heart and governs there with such despotic sway – aye, there’s the cause of all my sin and sorrow. ‘Tis more than love; ‘tis the fever of the soul and the madness of desire” (III. v. 20-25). Millwood does not love Barnwell in turn; she knows he loves her and will thus do anything for her. When Barnwell comes back from the murder empty-handed, she scolds him, “Whining, preposterous, canting villain! To murder your uncle, rob him of life…then fear to take what he no longer wanted…Do you think I’ll hazard my reputation – nay my life, to entertain you?” (IV. x. 39-44). Millwood is a businesswoman; she does what she does for economic gain, not love. Frustrated with Barnwell, she turns him in to the police. Millwood’s deeds are immoral, and eventually she is punished for her actions.

As is appropriate for a villain, Millwood will be executed as punishment for her actions. An eighteenth century audience would not accept a villain escaping unpunished.
If this is truly a “moral tale,” then those characters without morals must be punished as a warning to the audience. And yet Millwood does not regret her actions nor does she apologize for them. She tells Thorowgood: “I have done nothing I am sorry for. I followed my inclinations, and that the best of you does every day” (IV. xviii. 41-42). Like Thorowgood and other mercantilists, Millwood used her business sense to gain the most profit, at the expense of others. Millwood is punished for this, where merchants like Thorowgood are rewarded. Thorowgood’s system exploits workers as well as those who are marginalized by society, just as Millwood exploits her patrons.

Hynes notes that critics have viewed Millwood as a predecessor of the stereotypical villain of nineteenth century melodrama, “whose function is to concentrate all the blame for the evil in the world on a single outrageous scapegoat” (4). Critics often see Barnwell in a completely positive, guilt-free light, blaming Millwood for all of his actions. Mazella claims, “Millwood behaves so badly that she can be blamed for her own social exclusion, becoming the play’s incorrigible, irreducible remainder, and a figure incapable of belonging to any community at all” (798). This warrants a closer look at Millwood’s role. I believe that Lillo did not intend for Millwood to be as villainous as she acts; rather, he meant to show that her villainous actions were a result of her treatment by society. The very nature of a bourgeois tragedy is to focus on “an inherent flaw in that hero’s character which occasions his or her demise” (Freeman 544). George Barnwell, whose name appears in the play’s alternate title, can be assumed to be the tragic hero of this piece. Thus his destruction can be said to come from something inherent within himself, and not anything from the outside. Perhaps Millwood serves to
bring out these negative traits, rather than be the sole contributor to Barnwell’s downfall. As a tragic hero, Barnwell exhibits several tragic flaws. Two are his pity and love. He is drawn to steal and murder through his pity and love for Millwood. Another of Barnwell’s tragic flaws is his virtue. He believes he is being virtuous in his love for Millwood, although she has placed herself outside the boundaries of the moral community through her profession (Mazella 798).

Lillo was known to be a passionate social critic, and many of his views were communicated through his work. Lillo was one of the first playwrights to create a tragedy that centered on middle-class characters. Traditionally, tragedies dealt with famous historical characters or members of a wealthy class (such as Macbeth, a nobleman and a figure in Scottish legend). In *The London Merchant*, Lillo shows the consequences of the mercantile system on certain members of society (Fields 1). After Barnwell begins to know Millwood, he realizes she will be the cause of his downfall. As Fields notes, like Eve, Millwood has brought the knowledge that Barnwell’s mercantile society has many flaws. The system is profitable for figures like Thorowgood, but has the power to destroy figures like Millwood (5).

Millwood is a prime example, for Lillo, of capitalism’s harmful effects. As a prostitute, Millwood can be seen as what Fields calls a “sexual capitalist,” and may also be seen as the merchant of the title (1,3). She is referred to by her last name, like the men in the play. The other female characters are referred to by their first names. The name Millwood, in itself, suggests both an industrial environment and an industrial product, as
she herself is a “product” to be sold (3). She works within the economic system, exchanging services for capital.

Despite its negative connotations, Millwood’s profession does bring her a certain amount of power. She caters to the wealthy as well as the poor, and those wealthy men include the leaders of her society. She also learns that despite their places in society, men are all the same: “Men of all degrees and professions I have known, yet found no difference but in their several capacities. All were alike, wicked to the utmost of their power” (Lillo IV. xviii. 22-24). She can also be an independent businesswoman, capable of running her own business successfully. She needs men only as consumers.

Although Millwood is a shrewd – and wealthy – businesswoman, she is female, and thus unable to truly break into the mercantile world as the men do. She tells Barnwell: “What have I lost by being formed a woman! I hate my sex, myself. Had I been a man, I might, perhaps, have been happy in your friendship, as he who now enjoys it” (I. v. 46-48). Millwood is aware that whether or not she has control over her economic gains, as a woman, she will be marginalized by society (Fields 4). She tells her servant Lucy, “We are but slaves to men” (Lillo I. iii. 18). The concept of slavery implies an unequal social structure. Rather than a feudal or hierarchical system, which disadvantages men from birth, capitalism suggests every entrepreneur is on equal footing, and that they all have free consent. Every sale includes an equal exchange. But this only applies to men; women are not included as equals or of being completely “free” and independent (Hynes 2). As a “slave to men,” Millwood is not receiving an equal exchange, thus making her a slave.
As Fields notes, agency in the play revolves around Millwood’s actions (1). She sees Millwood as the play’s true protagonist, “brought to her extra-legal status by a male-dominated society…she knows her only commodity is her body” (2). Her activities in the private realm, usually reserved for women, bring her into the public realm through their monetary gain (Wallace 136). Millwood refuses to be seen solely as a commodity, however, and thus is victimized in this economy. When Thorowgood curses her with, “To call thee woman were to wrong the sex, thou devil!” (Lillo IV. xvii. 4), her reply has an economic slant:

I curse your barbarous sex who robbed me of ‘em [perfections of mind and body], ere I knew their worth, then left me, too late, to count their value by their loss. Another and another spoiler came, and all my gain was poverty and reproach…Riches, no matter by what means obtained, I saw secured the worst of men from both. I found it, therefore, necessary to be rich and to that end, I summoned all my arts. You call ‘em wicked; be it so! They were such as my conversation with your sex had furnished me withal (IV. xviii. 11-20).

She learned from these “spoilers” that her body was a commodity, one she could gain money for, and thus she could use the mercantilist system to her advantage. She also learned the benefit of earning money; for not only can she be comfortable, but also she can gain something from these “spoilers.” She tried to become part of this economic system by investing in herself (Fields 3). Millwood also understands the concept of equality that capitalism stresses. She does not want just sexual conquests; she wants wealth and power, which she knows do not come from leading a virtuous life (Wallace 136). She also sees herself as doing the same thing as men. She follows her desires, why should she be punished for that when others are rewarded? (Mazella 811).
And yet Millwood cannot be seen as entirely an innocent victim of her society and its economy, or even a “merchant” trying to succeed in a system that is against her. Lillo does place a distinction between her economy and that of the likes of someone like Thorowgood. As Hynes states, “Millwood’s lust for money is quite different from the detached attitude of Thorowgood: not a scientific method for spreading mutual benefits around the globe” (4). Despite what society has led her to do, Millwood is still incredibly greedy, as numerous characters repeatedly tell the audience. Lucy tells fellow servant Blount of Millwood’s plan to have Barnwell kill his uncle: “…her avarice, insatiate as the grave, demands this horrid sacrifice” (Lillo III. iv. 62-3). This avarice goes beyond her need to take revenge on her society; it is something that cannot be quenched, and thus she is punished for these extremes. She neglects the principles of Thorowgood’s business advice to his apprentice Trueman: “Method in business is the surest guide. He who neglects it frequently stumbles and always wanders perplexed, uncertain, and in danger” (III. i. 31-33). While she understands the principles of exchange of commodities, she lets her greed impede her business procedures, and fails. This in itself may be a remark by Lillo. Freeman suggests that Thorowgood may represent an aging, orthodox kind of mercantilism “in which benevolence, virtue, and reason motivate the pursuit of bourgeois capitalism and imperialism, while…excess, self-interest, and avarice inform the spirit of criminal opportunism in the gray world over which Millwood presides” (549). Perhaps Lillo personified the current state of mercantilism in Millwood, one that was greedy and destructive. Wallace suggests that while Thorowgood seeks economic growth, Millwood seeks only an increase of capital (137). Mazella believes that the desertion of Millwood
by her servants shows how immoral she has become; the servants reform themselves while Millwood does not. He also argues, “By ruining a youth and failing to acknowledge her own role in his downfall, she is guilty of failing to reciprocate his gesture of self-sacrifice” (815). Some of Millwood’s villainous actions, then, cannot be entirely pardoned or blamed on her society and its economic systems. These actions are truly villainous, committed with entirely selfish motives.

Along with his social commentary, Lillo may have included a bit of early feminism in his play. Millwood’s last speech has quite a feminist tone. She tells her male audience, “Women, by whom you are, a source of joy, / With cruel arts you labor to destroy. / A thousand ways our ruin you pursue, / Yet blame in us those arts first taught by you” (Lillo IV. xviii. 69-71). She curses them as well, telling men, “To right their sex’s wrongs devote their mind, / And future Millwoods prove, to plague mankind!” (77-78). She thus projects the blame of her villainy on the men who ‘ruined’ her, as well as on their economic systems.

While Lillo chose Millwood as the villain of The London Merchant, it is clear that he wanted to show how her society had forced her into her role. She was “spoiled” early on, and left to make the best life she could for herself in a world that did not encourage women to be active in the public, economic sphere. Lillo showed that women were among the victims of the new capitalistic system, and encouraged his audience to reevaluate the workings of their new economy. Perhaps the men that Millwood addresses in her final speech did not listen to her, as “future Millwoods” continued to increase in Western literature following her appearance.
3. The Demon in the House: Victorian Villainesses

With the exception of Millwood in *The London Merchant*, few major female villains appeared in the eighteenth century. Female villains began to appear in abundance, however, in the mid-nineteenth century, with the rising popularity of melodrama and popular fiction. In the Victorian period, which covered over half of the nineteenth century, women had a very limited role.

Women were believed to be intellectually inferior to men and unable to create anything aesthetic. They were prevented from receiving the education of their male counterparts because they were thought to be incapable of it: “Men believed that mental weakness in women came from her physical weakness as well as the knowledge of her dependence” (Hiatt 4). Although men believed that women were weak because of their dependent state, they did nothing to encourage the women to remove themselves from that state. Twentieth-century author and critic Virginia Woolf was surprised to find so little history of actual women. The only accounts of women she found were in literature. She pondered,

Indeed, if woman had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of the utmost importance;...heroic and mean, splendid and sordid; infinitely beautiful and hideous in the extreme; as great as a man, some think even greater. But this is woman in fiction (Woolf 43).

If a reader were to read of Victorian villains exclusively, that reader may conclude that many Victorian women were bold, conniving, intelligent, and villainous. But in reality, women were insignificant and intellectually restrained.

Women in Victorian literature usually fall into one of four categories: the angel, the demon, the old maid, or the fallen woman. No character is restricted to only one of
those categories, however, and often they mesh (Auerbach 63). Victorians saw the “angel in the house” as undeniably female and thus a kind of domestic goddess (64). She was confined to the home and the family and not encouraged to venture into the gritty outside world. On the other side was the demon woman, existing to seduce men and wreak havoc on the peaceful order of the world. These villainesses were often portrayed as *femmes fatales*, who were mixtures of seductive power and intellect (Willis 58). Unfortunately, under these extremes, there was no “earthly” home for women. They were either angels or demons, and certainly not allowed to be thinking, intelligent humans. Popular novelists such as Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray created both angelic and demonic women in their major novels to counteract each other.

Perhaps the standout female villain from Victorian literature is Becky Sharp, Thackeray’s cunning anti-heroine in *Vanity Fair*. Her roots lie in classic female villains such as Lady Macbeth, and echoes of her schemes would be imitated and admired in literature for the next two hundred years.

From her first appearance in the novel, it is clear that Becky will be very unlike the dainty Amelia Sedley, a true “angel” of Victorian fiction. Thackeray clearly presents the reason for the difference in the two girls. While Amelia has grown up in a life of middle class comfort and security, Becky is an orphan who works for her board at school. She is treated as lower class, and greatly resents it. She will not accept her reluctant gift from the school in the form of Johnson’s *Dixionary*: “But lo! And just as the coach drove off, Miss Sharp put her pale face out of the window and actually flung the book back into the garden” (Thackeray, 11). When Amelia is shocked at Becky’s forward behavior,
Becky tells her, “Revenge may be wicked, but it’s natural...I’m no angel” (12). Within the first chapter, readers get a glimpse of Becky’s character, although it has yet to reach its most sinister point. Thackeray makes clear that Becky will not be the Victorian angel of the story, and Becky knows this herself.

Becky is well aware of her situation. She realizes that one of the few options she has, as a poor orphan, is to marry well. She decides on Amelia Sedley’s brother Jos, knowing that while he may not be the best of men, at least he has the means to support her. She may like him specifically because he is *not* the best of men – Becky likes men she can firmly control.

When Becky’s plan to marry Jos falls through, she goes to the Crawley country residence as governess. As an unmarried young woman with no family, she must earn a living for herself. She is not without ambition, however, and tells herself, “Not that I dislike poor Amelia...only it will be a fine day when I can take my place above her in the world, as why, indeed should I not?” (84). While this may sound somewhat improbable considering both girls’ stations, Becky is repeatedly reminded of her cleverness and her intelligence. Amelia would never go out to find employment, nor does she use her wits as Becky does to support herself. Modern readers may favor Becky’s approach, but Victorian readers would have admired Amelia instead. Becky marries Rawdon Crawley in secret, hoping to secure his family’s fortune. Unfortunately this fails, but Becky realizes she has a husband who is not very intelligent: “Rebecca was fond of her husband...He was her upper servant...He went on her errands, obeyed her orders without question” (381). Becky is fond of Rawdon because he does as she likes, not because he
loves her. The couple has no money, but Becky uses many means to circumvent this obstacle. As social position improves, her true character becomes more and more evident.

Slowly, Becky uses her beauty and intelligence to rise in society, without a thought for her husband or child. “So to be, and to be thought, a respectable woman, was Becky’s aim in life” (478). While this may be Becky’s rather admirable goal, she attempts to accomplish it through non-respectable means. She tricks friends into giving her money to pay off her frivolous debts, using her sexuality to lure men into lending it. When Rawdon lands in a debtors’ jail, he discovers it was Becky who put him there, to remove him and make way for her sexual infidelities. In his only strong action in the novel, he leaves her with next to nothing, and she falls out of high society: “All her lies and schemes, all her selfishness and her wiles, all her wit and genius had come to this bankruptcy” (539). While Becky disappears from the story for several chapters to rebuild her reputation, Thackeray assures us that “the life of humdrum virtue grew utterly tedious to her before long” (651). At the very end of the novel, Becky begins spending time with Jos Sedley again, and convinces him to leave her money in his will. Thackeray strongly hints that Sedley’s death which closely follows this promise may not have been natural: “The solicitor…swore it was the blackest case that ever had come before him, talked of sending a commission to Aix to examine into the death…They decided [Becky] was the object of an infamous conspiracy, which had been pursuing her all her life” (698). To the very last, Becky is able literally to get away with murder by using her wiles and wit. Jadwin suggests that Becky is able to get away with this not by proving her innocence,
but by exploiting the Victorian notion that middle class women were incapable of committing crimes (37). Becky uses society to her own advantage, knowing that under Victorian definitions she cannot be called both a woman and a villain.

Noel Carroll reminds us that Thackeray was less concerned with the notion of individual villains as with the social institutions that produced them (110). His novel is, after all, social mockery and commentary, and it is important to view Becky in that light. And yet while she denies these aspects of her femininity, her society does not allow her to escape them all together. In the novel, Becky is a governess, a wife, a friend, and a seductress (Jadwin 47-8). She is limited to these roles by her gender, and because she is merely a vehicle, not a creator of these roles, she cannot be held fully responsible for her actions while playing them (50). Perhaps she wishes for revenge upon the society that limits her. She is successfully able to escape the class she was born into – this in itself is a major accomplishment. Becky makes this occur for herself – it is not simply that she marries a bourgeois man, but is able to fully play the part of a bourgeois woman. The money that Becky gains from Jos Sedley’s death will allow her to live comfortably, and most importantly, more independently than she would have had she married Jos. Becky is intelligent and witty, and readers are constantly reminded of her intellectual superiority over those who surround her, including her husband. And yet she is trapped in a society that doesn’t allow her to properly stimulate that intellect. Thackeray might also be suggesting that it is Becky’s knowledge of her own dependency that may make her demonic (Auerbach 90). She strives to be independent despite her lot in society and knows she cannot do that without money. She uses her state of dependence to her
advantage to appear weak in order to gain money and gifts from her admirers. She knows the system and how to play it, and in the end, Becky is the one with the last laugh – she is not truly punished for her crimes. She is taken back in by Amelia, and gradually works her way back up in society.

Becky also functions as a mirror image of Amelia. Amelia is the textbook “angel” of Victorian fiction while Becky plays the part of demon. It is interesting to note, as Nina Auerbach points out, that neither woman would be able to achieve that status without the friendship of the other (89). The two are in similar financial situations, and yet Amelia acts honestly. Becky, like so many other female villains, denounces many of her feminine attributes. The narrator tells the reader early on, “She had no soft maternal heart, this unlucky girl” (Thackeray 16). Becky has a son, who she cares little for: “Rebecca did not care much to go and see the son and heir. Once, he spoiled a new dove-colored pelisse of hers” (366). Becky cares more for her fine clothing than for her child. Little Rawdon loves his mother, but he is “worshipping a stone” (380). Amelia loves her child, Becky does not. While Becky is unfaithful to her husband in order to raise money, Amelia must give up her child in order to get money from her father-in-law. While her reactions may be counter to societal acceptance, Becky does what she can to succeed, and does it well. Unlike Becky, Amelia has been sheltered all her life and believes in the inferiority of women and the compliant attitudes of female virtue (Jadwin 41). Amelia could be seen as wasting fifteen years of her life on the memory of her husband, a man not worthy of the worship she bestows upon him. Nineteenth century readers may have commended her fidelity, but modern readers might see it as ridiculous.
While Becky attempts to hurt Amelia by telling her the truth about her husband George, it frees Amelia’s heart to love Dobbin, a man who is truly worthy of loving her: “Was she most grieved because the idol of her life was tumbled down and shivered at her feet, or indignant that her love had been so despised, or glad because the barrier was removed which modesty had placed between her and a new, real affection?” (692). Becky’s cruel action is thus beneficial to Amelia. It is possible Becky wanted to help Amelia, but chose to help her through cruelty.

What makes Becky Sharp remarkable is that she is one of the most unique and well-rounded villains of the nineteenth century, and dominates the novel that surrounds her. After Rawdon leaves her, Becky reflects: “She knew he would never come back. He was gone forever…She thought of her long past life, and all the dismal incidents of it. Ah, how dreary it seemed, how miserable, lonely, and profitless!” (538). Despite Becky’s selfish, villainous acts, she is, even for a moment, able to see the true results of her actions. The next time the reader sees Becky, the narrator says, “…the life of humdrum virtue grew utterly tedious to her before long” (651). Above all, Becky is human. She enjoys her success, and will continue to achieve that success with the means that work best for her. In the end, Becky is barely punished for her demonic actions, as Thackeray may be communicating that demons may prosper just as well as angels, though through slightly different methods. Becky is selfish and greedy, and does not desire to live life as Amelia does. And yet she follows her instincts, she lives her life the way she wants to live it. But she is a true villain in the original meaning of the word: a wily woman, who achieves a fleeting freedom. Although she is punished for her
independent aspirations, Becky Sharp would remain a powerful figure in literature, continuing to influence writers into the twentieth century.

The melodrama was the most popular form of literature in the mid-nineteenth century. Melodrama always contains strong emotions, the polarization of morals, extreme situations, actions and characters, and always ends with the virtuous triumphing over the evil (Brooks 11-12). From an entertainment perspective, as Peter Brooks notes, melodrama was an “effort to make the ‘real’ and the ‘ordinary’ and the ‘private life’ interesting through heightened dramatic utterance and gesture that lay bare the true stakes” (14). Melodramas were created for popular consumption, and worked to uphold conservative values. In a society that was rapidly becoming more industrialized, many traditional structures were changing. People, including women, were no longer working inside or close to the home, but in factories or elsewhere (Vicinus 174). There was a sudden conflict in the family and its values, and melodrama sought to reinforce those values. Traditional ethics were thrown into question, and melodrama showed how these ethics remained steadfast on a small scale. The concepts of ‘Good’ and ‘Evil’ were clearly outlined as characters (Brooks 17). The audience could watch a melodrama reward the virtuous and punish the villainous, and feel that although the world was changing, certain values of right and wrong would hold (13). Melodrama appealed to the powerless, namely, women and the working class (Vicinus 174). Often a plot involving a woman who left her family gave female audience members a chance to live vicariously. They experienced the character’s rebellion and saw her punished for it, reminding them that a woman’s place was in the home and with her family. The villains – including the
rebellious, unhappy wives - were always defeated and punished and the traditional order upheld (Vicinus 177).

Melodrama also acted as a kind of social discipline. Women who might have wanted to leave their families and find lives of their own could achieve a kind of catharsis by watching or reading about a woman doing just that. And yet, that woman would be simultaneously reprimanded for these wishes. Melodrama would show her how terrible life was made for a family after the wife and mother left it. She would have less of an inclination to leave her family, then, if she could see what repercussions would come of it. The plots of melodramatic works are often very similar and predictable. Victorian audiences would most likely have known how a story would end, and yet continued to enjoy that medium of entertainment. Perhaps the women needed a constant reminder of what the fates of their families would be should they selfishly choose to leave. Therefore melodrama was not simply entertainment, but a method of keeping the patriarchal social order in check.

Mary Braddon was one female author who created a number of popular serialized works, several containing female villains. In her highly melodramatic The Black Band, or the Mysteries of Midnight, the villainous Edith Vandaleur is a beautiful murderer and bigamist. In the end, she is punished for her misuse of her sexuality as much as for her crimes (Willis 59). Often villains like Edith act as femmes fatales because beauty may be the only weapon their society gave them (59). The women in these stories stepped out of their traditional societal roles and had to be punished. A common punishment was live burial. Willis sees this as symbolic of patriarchal society’s attempts to confine a woman
in a domestic sphere. Many female villains were placed in lunatic asylums, which can be seen as a figurative live burial (Willis 59).

The villains in Victorian literature sometimes mirrored the way in which real-life female villains were treated: “Most violent women were treated more delicately than men guilty of comparable crimes; they were acquitted more often, and their death sentences were more often commuted. The double standard...provided a cogent and ironic example of the Victorian dilemma: wanting to think of women as special, fragile creatures, even when they did not act that way” (Virginia B. Morris, quoted in Willis 66).

In Wilkie Collins’ novel Armadale, Lydia Gwilt uses the assumption that women couldn’t be guilty of murder, to her advantage. Instead of being hanged for the murder of her first husband, Lydia is never convicted and receives only a few months in prison.

One of the most popular of nineteenth century melodramas was Ellen Wood’s novel East Lynne, which was subsequently adapted into many different versions for theater. The story dealt with the quintessential “fallen woman,” who leaves her husband for her lover only to return guilt-ridden, in disguise and be punished for her rebellion. The issues in the play reflected unresolved social problems in the Victorian period. Lady Isabel’s rebellious actions presented the issues of individual morality, sexuality and female participation in the traditionally male spheres of politics and economics with which Victorians were faced (Vicinus 179).

In the 1860s, “penny bloods” or “penny dreadfuls,” so called because of their cheap value and wide availability, became very popular. They told sensational stories filled with crime and sexual misconduct (Willis 60). One such example was Wilkie
Collins’ *Armadale*. The novel, first published serially, contains strong melodramatic elements. It tells the story of two men who share the same name, Allan Armadale. The father of one Armadale killed the father of the second for stealing the woman he loved. Only one of the sons knows of the tragedy, and has disguised his identity under the alias of Ozias Midwinter. A scheming woman named Lydia Gwilt holds the truth of their family secret and intends to profit by it by manipulating the lives of both men. When *Armadale* was originally published, Miss Gwilt’s villainy shocked reviewers. A reviewer in *The Athenaeum* called her “one of the most hardened female villains whose devices and desires have ever blackened literature” (Willis 61). It is surprising that Collins’ audience should be so shocked by Miss Gwilt’s villainous deeds after experiencing so many popular melodramatic works. It is possible that Miss Gwilt is much more complex than many of the Victorian villainesses that predated her. It might also be because the reader is able to view Miss Gwilt through many perspectives within the novel, including those of other characters, the narrator, and most importantly, her own letters and diary (Willis 61). The reader learns of her most villainous actions first hand – it is quite shocking to read her diary entries in which she revels in her evil deeds. Miss Gwilt is intelligent and resourceful, using her beauty as her weapon but also her knowledge of the characters’ weaknesses and secrets.

Miss Gwilt is established as having villainous intent at an early age. Her background is questionable, but she was most likely working class. Placed as a maid in a wealthy family at age twelve, she aided one Armadale in love with her employer to disguise himself as the other Armadale. The deceived lover exclaims, “‘If she is alive
now, woe to the people who trust her! No creature more innately deceitful and more innately pitiless ever walked this earth’ ” (Collins 27). Willis estimates that while Miss Gwilt certainly had a part in those early crimes, she was more likely a pawn of the real plotters. Her later crimes result from her poverty-stricken state (62). After the incident, Lydia moves from location to location, gaining a reputation: “...the mistress of the school declined to take her back as a teacher, on the ground that she was too nice-looking for the place; the priest considered her to be possessed by the devil” (518). As an adult, Miss Gwilt constructs very complex schemes to gain wealth. The narrator describes her: “Perfectly modest in her manner...She had all the allurements that feast the eye, all the siren invitations that seduce the sense – a subtle suggestiveness in her silence, and a sexual sorcery in her smile” (373). Although Miss Gwilt has great beauty, it is described as she used it, with evil intent. She was tried for the murder of her first husband, an act punishable by death, and is only given a few months in prison. She is able to manipulate authority using the paradox that the Victorian “angel” could not possibly commit murder. Collins gives a valid reason, perhaps not for the murder, but for the motive: “[Miss Gwilt’s husband] had a lonely old house of his own among the Yorkshire moors, and there he shut up his wife and himself from every living creature...only one result could come, of course, of treating a high-spirited woman that way” (516). Miss Gwilt is an independent woman, and Collins suggests that keeping her confined within a house was the wrong thing to do. When a woman was confined to a domestic space, without any freedom to move outside of that space, she must have felt trapped. Miss Gwilt may want to do more with her life than remain in a house in a maternal role.
Miss Gwilt’s major scheme, the one that encompasses the major action of the novel, occurs when she decides she will get what monetary reward she feels the Armadale family denied her. She comes into the main action of the novel with villainous intent. She plans to marry Allan Armadale, without his knowing her past connection with his family, and gain his wealth upon his death (which she plans to bring about by any means necessary). Allan Armadale lives with his friend Ozias Midwinter, who hides his true identity from his friend. Miss Gwilt writes of Armadale, “I never saw a man whom I could use so ill, if I had the opportunity” (275-6). Her plan has an obstacle she does not foresee, that of Miss Milroy, a woman Armadale loves. Miss Gwilt tells her, “‘Nobody ever injured me yet, Miss Milroy…without sooner or later bitterly repenting it. You will bitterly repent it’” (362). Miss Gwilt is so set on her goal that she will stop at nothing to achieve it.

Miss Gwilt encounters another unseen obstacle when she falls in love with Armadale’s friend Midwinter, showing her weakness, “‘I am lonely and helpless. I want somebody who is gentle and loving, to make much of me’” (422). She goads Midwinter into telling her the secret of his life, and that his name too is Allan Armadale. Miss Gwilt concocts another plan, marrying Midwinter under his real name, then planning to kill Armadale and claim his fortune as “his” widow. Miss Gwilt attempts to poison Armadale and in doing so almost poisons Midwinter. She saves Midwinter, and writes him a note saying, “Even my wickedness has one merit – it has not prospered. I have never been a happy woman” (653) and poisons herself instead.
Miss Gwilt is never portrayed as the “angel on earth” (483) as is Miss Milroy. She says of herself, “I am a fiend in human shape!” (479) and one character refers to her as “a devilish clever woman” (508). It is interesting that Collins gives readers hundreds of pages out of Miss Gwilt’s diary. Through this personal medium, the reader can truly gauge Miss Gwilt’s motives and emotions. She writes in her diary, “I deserve to suffer; I deserve neither love nor pity from anybody” (552). In her diary, she is herself and has no secrets, and Collins allows his readers to see her intimate thoughts. In no other work from this period is the reader allowed to delve into the mind of the villain so completely.

It is possible that Collins was trying to write a sort of social commentary as Thackeray did. At one point in the novel, female visitors come to gawk at a new mental institution in the neighborhood. Collins says of them, “…anything is welcome to the women which offers them any sort of harmless refuge from the established tyranny of the principle that all human happiness begins and ends at home” (622). Driven “mad” by societal expectations, the women in this asylum can find an escape from their role within the house. The spectators of the asylum are interested as well, showing them that there may be life outside of their lives. Lydia’s happiness, obviously, does not include the home at all. Her life has been a tumultuous one, which has not entirely been her fault. As an adult she mercilessly seeks revenge.

In keeping with the time period, there are many elements of the melodramatic in the novel. Lydia Gwilt is a woman who behaves in an unconventional manner. She is clearly outlined as the villain, and in the end she is punished. Miss Milroy, the more
virtuous of the two women in the novel, is rewarded. Lydia has rebelled against her natural place as the angel in the house and must be punished.

In the Victorian period, female villains were created to denigrate and restrain the ideas of early feminists. The independent, assertive, sexually-fulfilled woman was a criminal who had to be punished for her intelligence and refusal to conform (Willis 66). Both Lydia Gwilt and Becky Sharp aspire to be independent and to live life on their own terms, and yet to achieve this they must act villainously and against society’s acceptable standards for women. Although Lydia is guilty of both bigamy and murder, and Becky of fraud, theft, and possibly murder, the two women committed greater crimes by attempting to be independent.

4. An Angel Rotting in the House: Great Expectations

Along with Thackeray, Charles Dickens was one of the most popular writers and important social critics of the nineteenth century. While the main agenda of Dickens’ 1861 novel, Great Expectations, may have been to outline the many problems of the British middle class, he also succeeded in creating several interesting villainesses who don’t seem to fit the norm of the Victorian female villain.

It is surprising that all the novel’s main female characters are violent towards protagonist Pip, whether physically or emotionally. As Curt Hartog notes, the women in the novel, “lacking the capacity to love, become destructive to themselves and to men. They must be held firmly, violently in check” (248). The first female Pip comes into contact with in his life is his sister, known only as “Mrs. Joe.” Her name refers to her
husband, although Joe himself has little to say or do in regards to his marriage. She usurps her husband’s authority and power and exercises both quite harshly (Hartog 250). Throughout the novel, Mrs. Joe reminds Pip that she is raising him “by hand,” but unfortunately for Pip, she means this literally. She scolds Pip often, beats him as well, and denies him basic maternal items such as food, comfort, and love. She sees him as a burden, and he is only useful when he can bring money home (Hartog 250). Joe himself, whose relationship with Pip is rather maternal and tender, thus fills the maternal role. He refuses to stand up to his wife for her treatment of Pip, having witnessed his own father’s violence toward his mother. He allows Mrs. Joe’s temper, which is perhaps why Pip allows Estella’s abuse towards him. Mrs. Joe is punished for her crimes in a violent manner as well when Orlick beats her senseless, and she becomes a weak, dependent female.

As a young boy, Pip is sent to visit the wealthy Miss Havisham, the novel’s most haunting female character, and perhaps its most fascinating. Abandoned by her fiancé on her wedding day, Miss Havisham has frozen that moment of betrayal in time, in every aspect of her life. She wreaks her revenge on men through her adopted daughter, Estella. Miss Havisham raises her to break the hearts of all the men who fall in love with her. When the two women first meet Pip, Miss Havisham tells Estella, right in front of Pip, “‘You can break his heart’ ” (Dickens 69). Miss Havisham takes a fiendish delight in watching Estella torture Pip. She tells him: “‘If she wounds you, love her. If she tears your heart to pieces, and it gets older and stronger it will tear deeper – love her, love her, love her!’ ” (260). Miss Havisham’s command is almost a curse to Pip who, despite
Estella’s refusal, continues to love her. Dickens often uses supernatural beings to characterize Miss Havisham, underlining her villainy: “‘How does she use you?’ she asked me again, with her witch-like eagerness, even in Estella’s hearing” (327). A page later, Dickens calls her “a wan spectre” (328). In this way, Dickens dehumanizes her. She is not a sad woman whose life has been trapped in one awful moment, but a mad woman with supernatural elements.

Although Miss Havisham takes an unhealthy delight in Estella’s scorning of her suitors, perhaps her most villainous crime is the creation of Estella herself. Curt Hartog sees Miss Havisham as a parody of motherhood, denying motherly love and creating a cold, emotionless child (259). She does not care for Estella’s own feelings or well-being, as long as Estella is avenging her guardian’s abandonment. Estella has been raised in a dark, empty mansion filled with rotting relics of Miss Havisham’s wedding, which, money or not, is certainly not a better environment for a child than Pip’s home life. Miss Havisham ruins Estella’s chances to have meaningful relationships – Estella marries a brutish man she does not love. Pip is hesitant to label Miss Havisham as a villain, believing she is his mysterious benefactor until late in the novel. He is sorely disappointed to find she is not, and to learn that she never had any secret desire to see him and Estella together.

Although Miss Havisham has frozen time around her, critic Robert R. Garnett suggests that she herself is not completely cold: “Miss Havisham burns with passionate love, passionate resentment, passionate despair; when she catches fire, it is only an outward and visible sign of her inner fires” (29). This fire comes after her true realization
of what she has done to Estella, which Pip witnesses: “There was an earnest womanly compassion for me in her new affection. ‘My dear! Believe this: when she first came to me, I meant to save her from misery like my own…But as she grew…I stole her heart away and put ice in its place’ ” (Dickens 429). Estella does not even have Miss Havisham’s capability to burn with passion, as she has been raised to suppress all feeling. I see Miss Havisham as more of a tragic character. She has been unable to heal from her emotional injuries and move on with her life. Critic Evelyn Romig notes that it is not the betrayal that has frozen Miss Havisham’s life, but her deliberate choice to make that betrayal central to her life (19). She prolongs her role as victim, waiting until a suitable avenger can be found. Romig suggests that in the story of Pip’s maturation, Miss Havisham represents an option for Pip’s own life: he can choose to freeze his life at any point and define it in only those terms, or, he can move on and continue to mature (20).

Estella is the third female who has a negative effect on Pip’s life. Few critics find Estella as intriguing as Pip does, however (Garnett 34). From the moment he meets her, he is obsessed with her and wishes to make himself worthy of her. Estella’s character is also very apparent from her first appearance – she is clear about her emotions, or her lack of them, which Pip ignores: “She was as scornful of me as if she had been one-and-twenty, and a queen” (Dickens 66). But Garnett points out that Estella’s nature predates even Miss Havisham’s treatment: she is the daughter of two murderers (36). Estella is not quite so violent, but she does wield her beauty like a weapon, and ‘slays’ many men with it, including Pip (37). She is very aware of her beauty and its effect on men, and tells Pip, “ ‘Moths, all sorts of ugly creatures…hover about a lighted candle. Can the
candle help it?’ ” (Dickens 336). She believes she has no heart, and tells Pip, “‘When you say you love me, I know what you mean as a form of words, but nothing more’ ” (389). She is unable to love, which does not make her an ideal Victorian woman.

Estella coldly accepts Miss Havisham’s methods until the middle of the novel, when Pip witnesses an argument between the two women. Miss Havisham snaps, “…you ingrate!…You stock and stone!…You cold, cold heart!” ” to which Estella aptly replies, “‘I am what you have made me’ ” (329). I believe that because of Miss Havisham’s control, Estella is less of a villain than a victim. She is pitiable because she has never been allowed to love wholly. Her actions are not her own, but a result of Miss Havisham’s tight control and conditioning. Miss Havisham has taught her to hurt the men who love her, and thus Estella has adopted her passionless manner as a defense against her desirability and her own susceptibility to love (Garnett 36). Both women were not always evil, but shaped through their experiences.

In Dickens’ original, unpublished ending to the novel, it is clear that Estella has suffered as a result of her actions, and perhaps wishes her life had been different. Much of her character remains uncertain, as the reader never hears her side of the story. She is only seen through Pip’s adoring eyes or Miss Havisham’s proud ones, and readers are never allowed to enter into her mind to gauge her true feelings. The public wanted to see Pip finally win Estella, so Dickens wrote a different ending for the published version of the novel. I prefer the original ending, and I believe it to be Dickens’ true feelings about the characters. Pip and Estella must remain apart.
Dickens was a Victorian, and was inclined to see women as angels or demons. He saw the feminine ideal as maternal and selfless. The women in *Great Expectations* reject motherhood, and this results in disaster (Hartog 248). It is interesting that Dickens’ violent females deny their femininity – they too must be unsexed in order to become acceptable villains. This also may be why Pip is unable to maintain healthy relationships with women. His more intimate feelings are spent on Joe, Herbert, and Magwitch, while his unrealistic obsession with Estella is never fulfilled (Hartog 256). Miss Havisham, undoubtedly the most memorable villain in the novel, is very unlike other female villains of the time, however. The “penny dreadful” standard stated that a villainous female’s most important weapon was her beauty. Miss Havisham is certainly not a *femme fatale*. Miss Havisham would more accurately be viewed as a kind of demon mother, a mutated version of the “old maid” category of female characters. She lays waste to the younger generation, thus reshaping the future in her own deformed image (Auerbach 114). Or, Miss Havisham could be viewed as an angel in the house gone bad. She remained faithful to her fiancé and she has confined herself so exclusively to her domestic environment that she need never leave her room. As a result of this, everything in her house is rotting away (127). Her domestic sphere is not one that is happy and content, but rancid and decaying. Mrs. Joe, too, can be seen as a fallen angel, and in the end she and Miss Havisham are punished violently for their inability to uphold the standard of the perfect Victorian angel.

Created by a male author, who while a social critic was nevertheless a product of his society, the three villainous females in *Great Expectations* have each achieved a
certain power over the men in their lives. That power has destructive consequences, both for Pip and for themselves. All three are punished for presuming to hold that power over men, and thus patriarchal society. The power that women were slowly gaining was challenging traditional society, and societal reactions to these changes were continually presented in the literature of the era.

5. “She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed:” The Ultimate Femme Fatale

Another example of a fallen Victorian angel appears in H. Rider Haggard’s novel She. She is perhaps one of the defining adventure stories of the nineteenth century. Published in 1887, it became an immediate bestseller (Gilbert 124). It predated a similar novel of a journey into Africa, Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, which was greatly influenced by Haggard’s novel. She’s title character is the powerful yet horrible Ayesha, a demonic femme fatale whose intelligence and power was very out-of-place in Victorian tradition – but certainly not with Victorian female villains.

The novel’s two protagonists are young, handsome Leo Vincey and middle-aged narrator Horace Holly. Through a family legend of Vincey’s, the two men hear of a civilization deep in Africa, “ruled over by a beautiful white woman…who is reported to have power over all things living and dead” (Haggard 25). Hundreds of Vincey’s ancestors have gone in search of this woman, and all of their quests have ended unsuccessfully. Vincey decides to find her himself, and he and Holly begin a treacherous journey over the African continent.
The society over which Ayesha rules would certainly be an unusual one for Victorian readers to experience. Ayesha’s society, unlike the society of the Victorians, was matriarchal: “It appeared that, in direct opposition to the habits of almost every other savage race in the world, women among the Amahagger are not only upon terms of perfect equality with the men, but are not held to them by any binding ties” (66). The Amahagger have a good reason for this, as a native explains, “‘In this country, women do as they please. We worship them, and give them their way, because without them, the world could not go on; they are the source of life’” (90). This would seem practically pagan to Victorians, and completely different from what they practiced.

Ayesha is a woman haunted by the death of her lover thousands of years ago. She has found the “secret of life,” which has allowed her to live on without growing old. She rules over her people from a volcano, waiting for the day when her love will return to her. That day arrives when she meets Vincey, the descendent of Ayesha’s lover.

Ayesha’s position as femme fatale is one that she shares with many of her fellow female villains. Holly tells the reader of Ayesha’s beauty: “I could, however, clearly distinguish that the…form before me was that of a tall and lovely woman, instinct with beauty in every part, and also with a certain snake-like grace which I had never seen anything to equal before” (109). Like Becky Sharp and Lydia Gwilt, Ayesha has great beauty, but is also powerful and destructive. Their beauty is not innocent, as all of these characters are sexually “free.” By describing Ayesha’s beauty as serpentine, Haggard alludes to Eve’s downfall in the Garden of Eden. Eve was the mother of all life, and Ayesha is a guardian of a mysterious eternal life. But Ayesha is also highly dangerous: “
'Beauty is like the lightning; it is lovely, but it destroys’” (119). Like Eve, Ayesha’s sexuality brings temptation and a fall. It is not only Ayesha’s beauty that is entrancing, but also her evil, and Holly realizes this as he falls under her spell: “I knew I could never put away the vision of those glorious eyes; and alas! The very diablerie of the woman…A person with the experience of two thousand years at her back, with the command of such tremendous powers and the knowledge of a mystery that could hold off death, was certainly worth falling in love with” (121). While Holly and Leo are in horrified awe of Ayesha’s power, they both fall in love with her. Why would they want to love someone so dangerous? Perhaps her danger is alluring, although this is a new twist on the female villains of the nineteenth century. Or perhaps it symbolizes what is “wrong” for a woman who reads about these characters: sexual freedom would be a path that would lead a reader to evil.

Ayesha falls in love with Leo, but her love is terrible and jealous, and she murders a woman, Ustane, who had fallen in love with him already: “No doubt [Ayesha] was a wicked person, and no doubt she had murdered Ustane when she stood in her path, but then she was very faithful, and by a law of nature man is apt to think but lightly of a woman’s crimes, especially if that woman be beautiful, and the crime be committed for the love of him” (181). Again, Holly excuses Ayesha’s crimes because of her beauty. Because she is beautiful and faithful, the men forgive her for killing another woman with little reason other than competition.

Holly thinks, “In the end she would, I had little doubt, assume absolute rule over… the whole earth…it would be at the cost of a terrible sacrifice of life” (190).
While this is a bleak prospect, Holly goes on to ponder the thought that perhaps Ayesha could change the world for the better. He is repeatedly excusing her crimes, and even fails to ponder how terrible it might be if Ayesha had enough power to rule an entire world controlled by men. She would be forced to gain that power in a horrific fashion, and most likely would stop at nothing. Through evidence of her previous crimes, it is probable that her absolute rule would be very terrible. From a postcolonialist perspective, it is interesting to note that for two thousand years, this native African society of the Amahagger has been ruled by a white woman. Usually the colony was viewed as an inferior, female entity to be “civilized” by a white male colonial culture. Ayesha’s rule is ended and her evil exposed when two white men arrive in her kingdom. They destroy her delusions of matriarchy and her presumptions to rule the world, bringing western “civilization” to a “primitive” society.

The climax of the story comes when Ayesha takes Leo and Holly to bathe in the “fire of life” and gain the eternal life that she enjoys. She steps into this fire, and instead of renewing itself, it works backwards. As Ayesha dies, her body reverts itself to what she would have looked like had she continued to age over two thousand years – a grotesque punishment for her desire to be eternally beautiful. Holly reflects: “That little heap had been for two thousand years the loveliest, proudest creature – I can hardly call her a woman – in the whole universe. She had been wicked, too, in her way; but alas! Such is the frailty of the human heart, her wickedness had not detracted from her charm” (221). Holly admits that Ayesha cannot be regarded as a woman. The women he knew in England would have been nothing like Ayesha.
In contrast to the Victorian ideal that women were angels or monsters, Amelia Sedleys or Becky Sharps, Ayesha is a mixture. Critic Gilbert calls her “an angelically chaste woman with monstrous powers, a monstrously passionate woman with angelic charms” (125). Men are drawn equally to her beauty and power. While her power comes from Nature, often personified as female, it is hers alone and she can control men and women together (Auerbach 38). Few women would have been able to retain this kind of power within Victorian society. Late nineteenth century artists were obsessed with the idea of the “New Woman,” one who threatened the patriarchy with her interest in feminism, suffrage, education, and literary production (Gilbert 133-4). Queen Victoria herself must have seemed an impressive emblem of matriarchal dominance. Haggard, then, creates an intelligent, powerful, and terribly beautiful female who achieves all these things. She is able to dissolve boundaries that Victorians saw as rigid, such as the “angel in the house” (Auerbach 61). She has created a civilization to her own liking – not only is she master of her own home, but also the people around her. It is the source of her own power that leads to her destruction – no magic but her own is sufficient enough to destroy her (Auerbach 37).

Ayesha speaks several languages, has ambitions to rule the world, and has lived for two thousand years. And yet in her death scene, she is punished for her presumptions of absolute power. Gilbert calls her destruction a “devolution” in which she passes through the stages of her unlived life, and “her power wrinkles, her magic dries up” (131) and the men are left with a horrifying husk of the once-beautiful queen. This destruction by the regenerative, phallic “pillar of life” in the “womb of the earth” may be a final
judgment on her typically masculine pride and ambition. Ayesha has violated a patriarchal law and the “natural” order of the world and must be punished (Gilbert 130). And yet it is in spite of, perhaps because of, this power she has that Holly and Vincey admire her. It is because she is so different from the women they are used to that she awes them. They are not only fascinated by her beauty, but by her power as well. Willis notes that in *She*, female power is linked with the abstract: instinct, spirituality and the supernatural. Male power represents science and logic. In the end, the male power is the one left standing as the female is punished for holding onto her power (65). Haggard might have toyed with the idea that a woman could have as much power as Ayesha does, but it is likely that *She* would not have been half as successful if Ayesha had remained powerful. Haggard had to stay true to convention and punish the woman for presuming that she could rule the entire world.

Ayesha’s two “halves” are unbalanced, but that unbalance is the opposite of what many of her fellow female villains experienced. While women such as Becky Sharp and Lydia Gwilt exist in societies that grant them no real power, Ayesha has in effect created a society in which she is granted all the power. Haggard, as a male upholder of Victorian patriarchy, must regulate the situation. Ayesha has none of the maternity or selflessness that her Victorian contemporaries were expected to have, and the unbalance presumably leads to her downfall.
6. Desiring Something More: Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, playwrights were moving beyond melodrama to other genres. Critics have called Henrik Ibsen’s 1890 play Hedda Gabler one of the most haunting in all of modern theater. Ibsen’s work falls within the Naturalist movement – the opposite of melodrama – that sought to mirror life as closely as possible (Ellis-Fermer 9). Spirited, independent Hedda Gabler and her new husband Jørgen Tesman have just returned from their honeymoon at the start of the play. As the play progresses, Hedda realizes that the domestic life she is expected to lead is very different from the life she wants. Like Ibsen’s play A Doll’s House, Hedda Gabler is about a woman caught in a marriage she cannot tolerate. While in A Doll’s House, Nora Helmer walks out on her family, Hedda is deeply set in convention and would never consider that (Ackley 163).

Hedda is 29, and has deliberately waited late to marry. She picked Tesman because he seemed to be able to offer her financial security. Yet she doesn’t seem very satisfied: “…what’s the most intolerable thing of all…Everlastingly having to be with…with one and the same person…” (2, 298-9). This new life bores Hedda. Although she may not like it, Hedda desperately wants to be respectable and fit into middle class life. She tells Ejlert Lövborg, an old lover of hers, that “There isn’t going to be any kind of disloyalty, anyhow. I won’t have that sort of thing” (2, 315). She attempts to conform. She is married, after all, and pregnant. She receives guests and oversees the domestic aspect of her new home, as a wife was expected to do (Ackley 165).
Hedda feels powerless in her new position. In her former life, she had the freedom to do as she liked, and now is expected to fulfill the duties of a proper wife. She meddles in her friend Thea’s affair because she wants “…for once in my life, to have power over a human being’s fate” (2, 324). Perhaps it is the powerlessness she feels over her own life that makes her want to gain power over someone else’s. Thea is a model of femininity, and although she is angelic, she is the one who walked out of her unhappy marriage (Ackley 166). Hedda cannot bring herself to do that. Towards the end of the play, Hedda is jealous of Thea’s beauty and her scholarly connection with Tesman. Thea and Tesman refer to a manuscript they both write as their “child.” In a fit of jealousy, Hedda burns it: “Now I am burning your child, Thea. You, with your curly hair. Your child and Ejlert Lövborg’s. I’m burning it – burning your child” (3, 345). This is a grotesque image, and shows Hedda’s true feelings. She would as soon destroy a real child between Thea and her husband as she would their manuscript. But Thea and Tesman will rewrite the manuscript, thus foiling Hedda’s plan. As the two sit down to work on it, Hedda takes her pistol into a room offstage and shoots herself.

In her introduction to the play, Una Ellis-Fermer notes that Ibsen was preoccupied with the problems of personal and social morality (9). In *Hedda Gabler*, he addresses many issues that affected women in her station. Critic Harold Bloom saw Hedda as “a monster created by the author in the form of a woman who has no counterpart in the real world” (Norseng 11). Ibsen was a naturalistic writer, however, and thus sought to mirror life as exactly as possible. In *Hedda*, he created a woman who married a man she does not love in order to gain financial security, which might have been a frequent occurrence
in Norway. Hedda doesn’t change through the play; she merely tries to escape the cage she has built around herself.

Katherine Ann Ackley views Hedda Gabler as a “pessimistic illustration of the effects of living in a patriarchal society where freedom and power go to men and even the brightest and most competent of women is firmly placed in the drawing room” (163). The audience first hears of Hedda through the opinions of others. Tesman is still shocked that he has managed such a good “catch” as Hedda: from the beginning, she is seen as a prize, to be looked at and admired. She accepts this role because she sees no other (Olsen 602-3). Hedda is an intelligent woman, but is not able to use that intelligence. She is not interested in her husband’s scholarly pursuits. Hedda is also competent at things that may have been considered more masculine. She rides horses very well, but cannot do that as freely now. Hedda does not want to live the life of a middle-class wife, but that of a man. She cannot imagine a woman having the ability to live with the freedom that a man does. She envies her friend Brack, who can live freely as a bachelor.

Hedda also longs for beauty. In the third act, Tesman asks for her assistance with his aunt, Hedda tells him, “I don’t want to think of illness or death. You musn’t ask me to have anything to do with ugly things” (Ibsen 333). Hedda is merely playing the role in which she was thrust. As a woman and a wife, she would be protected from the realities of life. When she gives Lövborg one of her pistols to aid his suicide, she asks him, “Couldn’t you arrange that – that it’s done beautifully?” (342). Yet Lövborg’s death turns out sloppy and was most likely an accident. So Hedda tries to create the beauty that has eluded her, herself, and in doing so escape the trap in which she finds herself, through
her own death (Norseng 1). Perhaps Hedda finds the current state of her life to be ugly, and thus must look elsewhere for beauty. She may also see that her role as a prized object of beauty will not last much longer. She is 29 and pregnant, and she cannot count on remaining beautiful (Olsen 605). Hedda is pregnant and unhappy, and may feel she is imploding. Now that she is pregnant, she has fulfilled her most important duty as a wife, but will become even more trapped once her baby is born. She longs for life, and yet she is afraid of it – she refuses to commit a daring act like Thea (Ellis-Fermer 11). But her “beautiful” ending is ironic – in destroying herself, she also destroys the “lovely Hedda” who is so admired (Olsen 608-9). She is also despairing over the state of her life. She destroys the “child” of Thea and Lövborg, but also destroys the unborn child within her body (Norseng 35). Norseng recognizes that Hedda does not destroy herself because she has failed to satisfy a patriarchal norm and requirement, but because she refuses to (12). Ibsen is exploring a society in which only the men hold power. Hedda’s need for control thus converts into physical violence and the ultimate escape from her cage results in tragedy (Ackley 164). Hedda feels too confined, and almost claustrophobic in a society that wishes her to deny the two halves of her self. She feels she can never retain that balance, and so must end her life.

In the twentieth century, women in literature changed along with their real-life counterparts. The categories into which Victorian female characters fell were no longer relevant. While female villains in the twentieth century were no more or less evil than their predecessors, the reasons for their villainy, and the consequences their actions brought, were changing.
7. A Murderous Female in Hemingway’s Short Fiction

Ernest Hemingway is one of the most well known American writers of the twentieth century, and is often credited with changing modern writing with his brief, simple style. In 1936, Hemingway published the short story “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber.” In the story, Francis and his wife Margot are on safari, hunting in Africa, with their guide, Robert Wilson. Margot, often unfaithful, is annoyed with her husband’s lack of courage in a lion hunt. When Francis then gains courage after a successful hunt, Margot becomes wary of him. While the group is on a buffalo hunt, a wounded buffalo begins to charge toward Francis. Margot shoots Francis from the car where she has watched the hunt, and his death is believed to be an accident.

The question most disputed by critics is whether or not Margot meant to shoot her husband. Hemingway lets the action remain ambiguous, allowing the reader put together the clues. I wish to examine whether Margot was a villain, which will lead to an answer to the question above.

The first image of Margot in the story is a mixed one: “Mrs. Macomber…was an extremely handsome and well kept woman of the beauty and social position, which had, five years before, commanded five thousand dollars at the price of endorsing, with photographs, a beauty product which she had never used” (Hemingway 4). This is an uncharacteristically long sentence for Hemingway, who perhaps wanted to emphasize these points all at once. Margot’s entire existence fits into the one sentence. Although Margot’s beauty is emphasized here, so is the manner in which it is exploited. She is, in essence, a liar, paid to endorse a product that she does not use. Perhaps this is the method
by which she lives her life. Her marriage, then, can also be seen as a lie. She does not love her husband, nor does she respect him by remaining faithful.

The Macomber’s marriage operates in an interesting fashion. The two have been married for eleven years, and are childless. “All in all they were known as a comparatively happy married couple, one of those whose disruption is often rumored but never occurs...Margot was too beautiful for Macomber to divorce her and Macomber had too much money for Margot ever to leave him” (22). Both retain qualities that are valuable enough in the other to keep their marriage intact.

Francis is completely aware of Margot’s infidelities, and she seems to do little to hide them. When Margot sees Francis run from the charging, wounded lion, she responds in turn: “...he could see that she had been able to see the whole thing. While they sat there his wife had reached forward and put her hand on Wilson’s shoulder. He turned and she had leaned forward over the low seat and kissed him on the mouth” (20). Margot does this right in front of her husband. Margot can do this because she knows her husband is too cowardly to leave her. She is free to do as she likes sexually and at the same time can remain with Francis and his wealth. When Francis discovers that Margot has slept with Frank, he tells her “‘There wasn’t going to be any of that. You promised there wouldn’t be’ ” (21). While Francis complains, he does nothing to stop her. Critic Bennett Kravitz suggests that perhaps Margot is as fed up with Francis accepting this kind of behavior as she is angry about his cowardice with the lion (86). Perhaps she needs a husband who will have more of a strong reaction, who will “go for the kill,” without cowardice. Critic Sugiyama argues that Francis needs Margot’s actions to reach his
courageous state (3). By chastising him and cheating on him, she startles Francis into action. Francis tells Wilson that he’d “like to clear away that lion business” (Hemingway 11).

Just as Margot knows that Francis will never leave her, he also knows she will never leave him. During his encounters with Margot and her husband, Wilson thinks of American women: “They are, he thought, the hardest in the world, the hardest, the cruelest, the most predatory, and the most attractive and their men have softened or gone to pieces nervously as they have hardened. Or is it that they pick men they can handle?” (8). This is not an entirely unfounded idea for Wilson to have. He has encountered plenty of American women to support this argument, and Margot is no exception. Margot will not leave Francis because she can “handle” him: he does not do anything when she sleeps with other men, and he is wealthy enough that she can live comfortably.

The shift in the story comes when Macomber unexpectedly kills three buffalo in an impressive hunt. He adopts a new swagger, and suddenly does not seem so cowardly anymore: “‘You’ve gotten awfully brave, awfully suddenly,’ his wife said contemptuously, but her contempt was not secure. She was very afraid of something” (34). Margot realizes that her husband now has the confidence he previously lacked. He can punish his wife for her infidelities and may finally leave her. When Francis returns from the buffalo hunt, energized and powerful, Margot suddenly begins to feel ill. Francis does not need her anymore (Kravitz 86). He now may have the confidence to leave Margot and believe he can find another beautiful woman who might respect him more than Margot does, and whom he can love more than he loves her. As Spilka
suggests, both Francis and Margot are now responsible for the failure of their marriage: Francis’ cowardice leads to her infidelity, just as his new bravery disrupts her power over him (195).

The most disputed passage in the story occurs near the end: “…Mrs. Macomber, in the car, had shot at the buffalo…as it seemed about to gore Macomber and had hit her husband about two inches up and a little to one side of the base of his skull” (Hemingway 36). Hemingway, always careful with his words, does say that Margot shot “at the buffalo.” If she wanted her husband dead, and the buffalo was about to gore him, couldn’t she just have let it happen? Or was she afraid that Wilson might shoot the buffalo first and then she would have no chance to kill Francis? If she did intend to kill her husband, she could inherit all of her husband’s money and be able to live her own life. Kravitz suggests “consciously, Margot no doubt acts to save her husband’s life, while unconsciously…she finds a way to live with Francis in a way that will not threaten her existence” (87). She can be a proper widow, free to love others, and yet others will believe she loves her husband. So-called “traditional” critics believe that Margot consciously wanted to kill her husband; “revisionist” readers believe Francis’ death was an accident (Cheatham 739). Critic Nina Baym equates Margot with the lion, seeing both as innocent victims. She argues “Margot is innocent because she herself is as much a victim of macho cruelty as the lion. Both have been hunted down by great white hunters…” namely, the lion by Francis, and Margot by Frank Wilson (Kravitz 83). Spilka points out that this is Hemingway’s statement of women interfering in men’s business: when Margot picks up the gun (not just any gun, a Mannlicher) she disrupts a
man’s world (197). Hemingway may be suggesting that when women interfere in male-centered activities, these kinds of things happen.

I wish to argue for Margot as a villain. Margot was a twentieth-century woman, perhaps not as liberated as those after her would be, but she certainly has more freedom that her Victorian predecessors. Margot is not confined to the house; she is allowed to accompany her husband on safari and on the hunting trips themselves. She is, however, confined to her role as wife and woman: she can neither hunt nor do anything else. She must remain in the car while the men have all the excitement. She finds her own excitement only in affairs with other men. Readers have no indication that she does anything else. Francis is not an adequate match for her; while she is bold, he is cowardly. She takes up the gun (perhaps) to save her husband; she kisses Wilson in front of Francis. She might need a mate who is up to her level. She may also, as Spilka notes, be frustrated by “a world where men are more likely to kill women than be killed by them” (190). I interpret this killing to be men killing women’s independence, and their desires for anything other than marriage and motherhood. But Margot is married, and the lack of “excitement” in her marriage should not give her cause to commit adultery or murder. If she is bold, she is not bold enough to leave her husband in hopes of finding something better – she is too greedy for Francis’ money (and, perhaps, she feels there is nothing better).

Like other femmes fatales, Margot uses her sexuality to gain power – the power of escaping her life. She does not gain in ally in Wilson for sleeping with him; if anything, he views her with more disdain. She also must have been well aware that she was not the
only one to help her husband during the buffalo hunt. Wilson, the professional hunter, would have been ready to kill anything that went after his client (Spilka 193). Margot’s instincts did not activate in this manner during the lion hunt – she was disgusted with Francis, not rushing to save him. If Margot then did intend to kill her husband, she picked a rather brilliant moment. If most people viewed the Macombers as a happy couple, they would then assume she tried to kill the buffalo to save Francis. She will gain all of Francis’ money and free herself to live her own life, and presumably without any sort of consequences. She is a villain who has won.

Hemingway deliberately left the ending of his story ambiguous. Readers can only guess at Margot’s intentions, and while critics defend her actions and claim she did not kill her husband, I believe that in keeping with female villainy, she did intend to kill her husband. She was perhaps reacting to her place in society: a place where she was restricted to a marginal role, where she could not do anything but be a proper wife. This is motive enough for her wish to kill her husband, the one thing that impedes her independence and social freedom.

8. Rebecca: A Villain Absent From the Text

In the period between the two world wars, there was an increase in the demand for popular romance (Wisker 85). Rebecca by Daphne du Maurier is perhaps one of the most successful works of popular fiction from the first half of the twentieth century. First published in 1938, the novel updated the gothic romance genre popular in the nineteenth century to fit 1930s England. It tells the story of the second wife of the elusive and
wealthy Maxim de Winter, who brings his wife to live at Manderley, his country estate. This unnamed narrator feels she must fill the competent shoes of Maxim’s first wife, Rebecca, who seemingly was adored by all, including Maxim himself. The narrator learns that Rebecca was not, in fact, the perfect wife she seemed to be, but actually unfaithful and manipulative, which led Maxim to kill her in a bout of passion. While the sinister housekeeper Mrs. Danvers acts as a living emissary to the dead Rebecca, behaving villainously on Rebecca’s behalf, the absent Rebecca herself may be construed as a villain in the novel. Although she herself does not appear, her presence haunts all of the characters, most notably the narrator, and is the very center of the novel’s action.

Mrs. Danvers was Rebecca’s nurse when the latter was young, and remained close to her following Rebecca’s marriage to Maxim. She became the housekeeper at Manderley and still holds the most power there. Even after Maxim marries a second time, Mrs. Danvers continues her loyalties to his late first wife. While Rebecca’s villainous actions are not revealed until the climax of the novel, Mrs. Danvers is sinister from the start. Mrs. Danvers is first described when she meets the narrator: “Someone advanced from the sea of faces, someone tall and gaunt, dressed in deep black, whose prominent cheek-bones and great, hollow eyes gave her a skull’s face, parchment-white, set on a skeleton’s frame” (du Maurier 66). In true gothic form, Mrs. Danvers’ ominous appearance corresponds to her nature. She dislikes the narrator because the narrator seeks to take Rebecca’s place as Maxim’s wife. Mrs. Danvers is still so enamored with Rebecca that she has perfectly preserved Rebecca’s bedroom, and gloatingly shows it to the narrator, telling her, “‘Why have you never asked me to show it to you
before?...Now you are here, let me show you everything,’ she said, her voice, ingratiating and sweet as honey, horrible, false...The touch of her hand made me shudder. And her voice was low and intimate, a voice I hated and feared” (166-7).

Midway through the novel, the narrator believes that Mrs. Danvers is trying to befriend her. Mrs. Danvers kindly suggests a costume for the narrator to wear to a party. The costume turns out to be the same one that Rebecca wore to the last party before her death. As the narrator flees the party in shame and embarrassment, she notices, “that the door leading to the west wing was open wide, and that someone was standing there. It was Mrs. Danvers. I shall never forget the expression on her face, loathsome, triumphant. The face of an exulting devil” (212). Perhaps Mrs. Danvers’ most malevolent act occurs when she tries to convince the narrator to kill herself:

“Why don’t you go?... We none of us want you...It’s you that ought to be lying down in that church crypt, not her”...She pushed me towards the open window...”Look down there,” she said, “It’s easy, isn’t it? Why don’t you jump?...Don’t be afraid...I won’t push you. I won’t stand by you. You can jump of your own accord. What’s the use of your staying here at Manderley? You’re not happy. Mr. De Winter doesn’t love you. That’s not much to live for, is it? Why don’t you jump now and have done with it?” (243-4).

If Mrs. Danvers were to succeed, it is possible that life for her would not improve. She would not have to see the narrator take over Rebecca’s role, but she would also not get Rebecca back.

Once the narrator knows the truth of Rebecca’s death, Mrs. Danvers ceases to frighten her. When the narrator finds Mrs. Danvers to ask her a question. Mrs. Danvers answers, “ ‘If Mrs. de Winter wanted anything changed she would ring me personally on the house telephone.’ ‘I’m afraid it does not concern me very much what Mrs. de Winter
used to do,’ I said. ‘I am Mrs. de Winter now, you know’ ” (289). The narrator gains power when Rebecca, and thus Mrs. Danvers, loses it.

Because Rebecca herself does not appear in the novel, the narrator (and the reader) must rely on the accounts of others as well as evidence from inanimate objects, to form an opinion of Rebecca. Rebecca is beautiful and destructive, a *femme fatale*. When Maxim lends a book to the narrator, she is surprised to find Rebecca’s mark on it: “It fell open, at the title page. ‘Max from Rebecca.’ She was dead…How alive was her writing though, how full of force…It was just as if it had been written yesterday” (57). Rebecca’s handwriting represents Rebecca’s presence, which is still very much alive at Manderley. Other objects contain very feminine traces of Rebecca, including her handkerchief that still contains her floral scent and a mark of lipstick (Nigro 4). Rebecca’s powers of femininity were perhaps so strong as to linger for months after her death. Mrs. Danvers tells the narrator that when Rebecca was a child, men would turn “‘to stare at her when she passed, and she not twelve years old. She knew then, she used to wink at me like the little devil she was. ‘I’m going to be a beauty, aren’t I, Danny?’ ” (241). That Rebecca is characterized as a “little devil” is endearing to Mrs. Danvers. Even as a child, Rebecca is aware of the power of her physical appearance over men.

In one episode, the narrator speaks with Ben, a mentally disabled man who knew Rebecca: “‘You’re not like the other one…Tall and dark she was…She gave you the feeling of a snake…By night she’d come’ ” (153). Ben is the only person who speaks negatively of Rebecca, until Maxim reveals to the narrator the truth of Rebecca’s death. Although mentally disabled, Ben describes Rebecca with the archetypal symbol for a
villainous female – a snake. Along with Ben’s disturbing description, Rebecca is villainous to the narrator because the narrator feels she can never live up to Rebecca’s standards. Everyone in the house, including her husband, seem still to worship and respect Rebecca, forcing the narrator to live life as Rebecca did. She laments, “I could fight the living but I could not fight the dead…Rebecca would never grow old. Rebecca would always be the same. And her I could not fight. She was too strong for me” (232). Rebecca also can be seen as evil in her treatment of men. Mrs. Danvers tells Maxim, “‘She was not in love with you…she was not in love with anyone. She despised all men. She was above all that…Love-making was a game with her, only a game’ ” (337). Rebecca makes the men around her, including her husband, believe that she loves them, when she is really conducting her affairs for her own amusement.

Despite Mrs. Danvers’ sinister acts, she does not know the truth of Rebecca’s death. She believes the death was an accident and that Rebecca drowned. In reality, Rebecca told Maxim she was pregnant by another man, and in a fit of anger, he shot her. Rebecca was not pregnant, however, and was actually dying from cancer. Mrs. Danvers tells the narrator, “‘There was only one thing that ever worried her, and that was the idea of getting old, of illness, of dying in her bed’ ” (340). Rebecca is comfortable in the power that her beauty and vitality bring her, and dreads losing them. Maxim’s murder of her, then, could be another example of her villainy. Perhaps Maxim should not have shot her, but it can be inferred that she induced Maxim to kill her so she would not have to deal with the pain of illness. Maxim tells the narrator that, “‘Rebecca lied to me on purpose. The last supreme bluff. She wanted me to kill her. She foresaw the whole
thing. That’s why she laughed. That’s why she stood there laughing when she died’” (370). Rebecca knows that she will be freed from the pain of illness if Maxim kills her, and she also knows that he’ll be punished for murder, which made her laugh as she died. Her villainy is so strong and so calculated that she can cause others to act villainously.

Maxim and Rebecca’s relationship can be seen as very similar to that of the Macombers. Maxim tells the narrator that Rebecca “‘was vicious, damnable, rotten through and through. We never loved each other, never had one moment of happiness together. Rebecca was incapable of love, of tenderness, of decency. She was not even normal’” (269). Rebecca had extramarital affairs and did not even live with Maxim for the majority of the time. And yet she and Maxim were able to keep up the semblance of a happy married couple. Critic Gina Wisker wondered what kind of man would accept his wife’s infidelities for so long, without telling anyone about them (90). Francis Macomber accepted his wife’s many affairs because he was too much of a coward to put a stop to them. Maxim, however, is a stronger character. He must have loved Rebecca at one point, and most likely for those strong traits that others admire. Wisker notes, “More evil and decadent than Rebecca is the man who murders her and hides the murder, taking a naïve second wife who…tries to emulate the image she feels Max must adore in his first wife” (93). Fans of the novel might defend Maxim’s wish to find happiness in his second marriage, instead of acting in an evil fashion. This is also a good example of a reader’s varying reactions to a female or a male villain. The reader can forgive Maxim and not Rebecca, perhaps because his evil deeds do not seem to compare with hers.
Critic Kathleen Butterly Nigro argues that because few characters seemed to know the “true” Rebecca, with the exceptions of Maxim and Ben, it is probable that Maxim could be lying about Rebecca’s true nature (1). The only pictures the narrator, and the reader, receive of Rebecca are other people’s opinions. We have no evidence of Rebecca herself; her voice does not exist in the story. Nigro sees her worst crime as resisting male definition and insisting on her freedom to define herself and her sexuality (1). Maxim is angered by the thought that Rebecca is pregnant with another man’s child even if he himself does not love her (5). How, then, does this justify murder? Unlike the shy narrator who cannot even confront her husband on his past, Rebecca was a strong character, who was not afraid to define what she wanted. While Rebecca’s strong commands and decisions still echo throughout daily life at Manderley, the narrator chooses to remove herself from all decision-making (Wisker 91). All of the outside opinions of Rebecca given in the novel (and there are many) extol her virtues and her actions. Even the narrator seems drawn to identify with Rebecca, unwilling to take Rebecca’s place until she knows the “truth” of Rebecca’s death. She then acts with a kind of superior confidence, and her orders to Mrs. Danvers are reminiscent of Rebecca’s. The narrator is impressed with the physical beauty of Manderley, which Maxim tells her was the result of Rebecca’s efforts. Although she made Manderley what it was, it may also show that Rebecca was obsessed with the idea of appearances. The ideal appearance of Manderley, like her marriage, hides the imperfections within.

Rebecca’s motives for her villainy could be that she craved amusement. Mrs. Danvers wants to preserve the memory of the woman she was devoted to. Neither
woman was forced into villainy because of any societal pressures or restrictions. The novel is suspenseful and interesting because of these mysterious characters. It is also interesting to include a villain, like Rebecca or Margot Macomber, whose evil deeds are left to the interpretation of the reader. Rebecca could have been malicious, as Maxim believed, or she could have been the outgoing, garden-loving, independent woman that others saw. While Mrs. Danvers is easy to discern, Rebecca is more elusive. Her name is the title of the book and yet she herself does not appear anywhere in it. Perhaps this is because her society did not yet have a place for her. If she is not villainous, then where else does she fit? She represents a new kind of female villain that emerged in the twentieth century: one who was open to interpretation, one who contained both good and evil traits, and one whose traits were not unique but present in every woman.

9. A Motiveless Monster: Cathy in East of Eden

In his novel East of Eden, John Steinbeck wanted to tell “‘one of the greatest, perhaps the greatest story of all – the story of good and evil, strength and weakness, of love and hate, of beauty and ugliness’ ” (Owens 239). The story was, in essence, a modern retelling of the Biblical story of Cain and Abel. Published in 1952, the novel includes three story lines that intersect at different points: the story of the Hamilton family (Steinbeck’s own relatives), the story of the Trask family, and the story of Cathy Ames, possibly the twentieth century’s most malicious female villain.

The first third of East of Eden describes the lives of brothers Adam and Charles Trask. Charles is more violent while Adam is passive, leading to many confrontations between the two. One night, a badly beaten woman arrives at their house, calling herself
Cathy. Adam falls in love with her and she agrees to marry him. Adam takes Cathy to California and purchases a ranch. Cathy gives birth to twin sons, shoots Adam in the shoulder, and leaves him to become a prostitute. Desolate after she abandons him, Adam relies on the help of the neighboring Hamilton family to raise his sons Aron and Cal. Aron, like Adam, is more passive, while Cal is more aggressive. The two boys are doomed to repeat the story of Cain and Abel when Cal tells Aron the truth of their mother, which sends Aron to his death. Through that experience, Cal is able to grow into a better and more whole human being than his brother could have been.

Steinbeck begins the chapter in which Cathy is introduced with a discussion of monsters: “I believe there are monsters born into the world to human parents…The face and body may be perfect, but if a twisted gene or malformed egg can produce physical monsters, may not the same process produce a malformed soul?” (Steinbeck 71). Cathy’s is villainous right from the start. Her villainy is not caused by society but is natural within her. Unlike the other female villains I have examined in this study, Cathy Ames seems to be a motiveless villain. Steinbeck tells the reader that she is born a monster; nothing causes her to be this way. In keeping with the archetype, Cathy’s appearance is serpentlike. She is described as having “wide-set hazel eyes with upper lids that drooped…Her nose was delicate and thin, and her cheekbones high and wide, sweeping down to a small chin so that her face was heart-shaped…Her ears were very little, without lobes, and they pressed so close to her head that even with her hair combed up they made no silhouette.” A few lines later, Steinbeck continues with Cathy’s physical description: “Her feet were small and round and stubby, with fat insteps almost like little
hoofs” (72). With these two descriptions, Steinbeck places Cathy in the Satan role of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. She is not just one embodiment of Satan either, as implied by these two descriptions. Cathy can be a shape-shifter, and will mold to whatever shape she feels will produce the best reaction from her victims.

Cathy’s evil deeds begin almost instantly. There is no loss of innocence; she knows how to manipulate others from birth: “As for Cathy’s mother, she was so bound and twisted in a cocoon of gauzy half-lies, warped truth, suggestions, all planted by Cathy, that she would not have known a true thing if it had come to her” (77). Cathy is able to manipulate her parents until she does not need them anymore, and then she murders them so she can be independent from them. She learns how to exploit the weaknesses of others, namely men. While working as a prostitute, Cathy is perhaps in the best place to see those weaknesses (Everest and Wedeles 20).

Adam Trask ignores his brother Charles’ warnings and marries Cathy. He does not see who she really is, but sees the woman he would like her to be: “Perhaps Adam did not see Cathy at all, so lighted was she by his eyes” (Steinbeck 132). Perhaps Cathy cannot be blamed for completely destroying Adam; to an extent he did it to himself. Cathy agrees to marry Adam so she can gain temporary protection from a man who wants her dead: “She had made up her mind to marry Adam but she had so decided before he had asked her. She was afraid. She needed protection and money…That had been the only time in her life she had lost control of a situation. She determined never to let it happen again” (121). Cathy repeatedly warns Adam, however, that she will leave him when she no longer needs his protection, but he does not listen: “‘Adam, I didn’t want to
come here. I am not going to stay here. As soon as I can I will go away’ ” (173). After she does leave, Adam mourns her loss for over a decade, despite the advice of his friends, telling him to forget Cathy.

Like her literary predecessors, Cathy is beautiful and sexually forward. As a young child she learns that she can use her beauty and sexuality as a means to manipulate others and gain the ends she desires. As an adolescent, she learns of the full power of her sexuality when a young man who loves her commits suicide. Knowing that her greatest power is in her sexuality, Cathy willingly becomes a prostitute. This position gives her freedom as well as great power in the community. She has dealings with the powerful men in the community, and thus knows their secrets and has the ability to ruin their respectable reputations. Samuel Hamilton tells Adam of Cathy’s activities: "‘[Cathy]…takes the fresh and young and beautiful and so maims them that they can never be whole again’ ” (304).

Throughout the novel, there are countless descriptions of Cathy’s evil. In Eden, Satan served to lead Adam and Eve to knowledge, however painful that knowledge and its consequences were. Within the framework of East of Eden, Cathy acts as an important catalyst for the Trask family. The important turns the story takes occur because of Cathy’s presence. It is because of her that Adam moves to the Salinas Valley in California, wanting to create an Eden-like paradise for his Eve. In California, Adam meets the Hamiltons, thus linking the two families chronicled in the novel. Cathy gives birth to the twin boys who embody the Cain/Abel plotline of the novel. Perhaps the most important change occurs when Cathy and Adam’s son Cal visits his mother in the brothel
she owns, wanting to know the truth about her. He feels he is intrinsically evil, and wants to see if he inherited that evil from his mother. He tells her of himself and his brother Aron, and sees that his mother lacks the ability to love. He is thus able to realize his own dynamic capacity to love and to change. Like the serpent in the Garden, Cathy brings the knowledge to Cal that makes him human. He thus can embody the theme of the novel, embodied in *timshel*, the Hebrew word that Adam and Samuel Hamilton discuss. The men find that in previous translations of the Old Testament, this word was translated as “thou shalt.” This implies that man himself has no power over his actions; he is ordered to perform them by some divine power. Adam and Samuel find, however, that the word actually translates to “thou mayest,” promoting free will and the power to shape one’s own destiny.

The concept of *timshel* conflicts with Cathy’s character. If Cathy was, in fact, *born* “a monster,” she would have had no choice as to her actions. She was born evil and thus could not choose to be good. Owens notes, “Why, if *timshel* must apply to all of us, does it seem not to apply to Cathy or Adam…why does Steinbeck create absolutists such as Adam and Cathy, who seem, for most of the novel, incapable of free will?” (253). The villains that precede Cathy all *chose* to be villainous. Perhaps Steinbeck does believe that *timshel* applies to all people, perhaps, all nonfictional people. If his work is meant to be an allegory, then the characters within it should not be taken for real people. They are meant to represent certain concepts of good or evil, or free will. Gladstein notes, “Steinbeck…expressed his intentions during the writing process of creating characters of symbolic import. He wanted his readers to find the varying levels his works operated on”
(30). These characters then, stand for something else. Thus, characters like Cathy are meant to provide a contrast to characters like Cal. If Cal had not met Cathy, he would have lived his life believing he was inclined toward evil. Cal is relieved to realize he is not like this. He can make the choice to be good or to be evil, and he also has the capacity to love (Burkhead 136). It was not until he met Cathy that he realized he had a choice. Cathy, then, is not necessarily a character in her own right but a device to cause change in other characters.

Along with her role as a catalyst, Cathy also acts as a contrast to the “good” characters in the book, namely Samuel Hamilton. Unlike Adam, Samuel immediately sees Cathy for what she is, and Cathy knows this: “…he saw true hatred in her eyes, unforgiving, murderous hatred…”’It’s not a pleasure to me, young woman. I don’t know your trouble and minute by minute I don’t care’” (Steinbeck 189-190). Usually Samuel is a gentle and benevolent figure, and yet he becomes stern and harsh when he meets Cathy. Ariki notes “It is quite natural that Samuel, the embodiment of love, can detect almost instinctively the evil of the loveless creature, Cathy” (233). Cathy is not a threat to Samuel, and thus she has no power over him (Burkhead 137). Good cannot exist without evil, and thus a truly “good” character like Samuel needs a character to be as equally evil as he is good.

Although Cathy seems to be all villain, she has one weakness, which the “good” characters understand. Cathy has no capacity to love; Steinbeck suggests she was simply born without this. Because she never had it, she doesn’t know that she needs it: “A man who loses his arms in an accident has a great struggle to adjust himself to the lack, but
one born without arms suffers only from people who find him strange. Having never had arms, he cannot miss them…No, to the monster the norm must seem monstrous, since everyone is normal to himself…To a man born without a conscience, a soul-stricken man must seem ridiculous” (Steinbeck 71). Cathy goes through life wondering what it is she lacks. Cynthia Burkhead suggests that without the ability to love, Cathy is a part of the world in body only, without a soul or a link to anything divine (135). Throughout the novel, Cathy grows increasingly aware that she lacks something. It is Cal who finally shows her the truth. He asks her, “‘Did you ever have the feeling like you were missing something? Like as if the others knew something you didn’t – like a secret they wouldn’t tell you? Did you ever feel that way?’” (Steinbeck 461). Cathy panics at these questions, and Cal continues:

Cal said, “I was afraid I had you in me.”
“You have,” said [Cathy].
“No, I haven’t. I’m my own. I don’t have to be you…I think you’re afraid” (462).

Besides Mr. Edwards, who injures Cathy at the beginning of the novel, Cal is the only other character to see Cathy’s fear. He knows she cannot love, and is glad to find out that he can. Cal’s words haunt Cathy: “She spoke softly to herself. ‘Steady now…Quiet down. Don’t let it hit you…’ Cal’s last words had been repeating themselves over and over in her head. ‘I think you’re afraid.’ She said the words aloud to herself to kill the sound” (463). Along the proper path of a villain, Cathy is punished for all of her villainous deeds. She does not feel guilt, but she lacks anything good within in her to balance out her evil. She does desire what she lacks, and, afraid of the world, she decides to remove herself from it.
Cathy’s villainy is also shown in her lack of maternal instinct. Female villains are usually not maternal. Cathy abandons her children as soon as they are born, and has no interest in them until many years later. She also destroys the characters in the novel that are her mother figures: she murders her own mother, and she murders maternal Faye, the proprietor of the brothel in Salinas where Cathy goes when she leaves Adam. Cathy does not have any motive for these murders besides that she desires freedom and power. Cathy’s parents punished her when she tried to run away, so she killed them to get them out of the way. When she murders Faye, she takes control of the brothel, giving her more money and power. It is probable that as Adam’s wife, Cathy would not have been “free.” She would have had to live up to the ideal woman he imagined her to be. She would have had two children to raise and a large ranch to manage. Of course, this is not sufficient motive enough to excuse Cathy’s actions. Unlike other villains who were abused or wronged by society or committed crimes to help those that they loved, Cathy acts selfishly.

Cathy’s tragedy occurs when she realizes what she lacks. At the same time realizes she can never have that because she was born without it. Cathy kills herself, imagining as she dies that “…she grew smaller and smaller and then disappeared – and she had never been” (Steinbeck 551). Her actions only served to affect people when she is alive. Because she has no love, nothing of her has remained behind.

No reader doubts Cathy’s villainy, and I have found no critic who defends her actions. And yet, it may be said that Cathy is the most intriguing character in East of Eden. We read fiction to go outside of ourselves, and it is enjoyable to read about
someone as evil as Cathy. Hansen argues that Cathy is so evil that she is beyond evil itself; and being that, she is “more alive that any other character in the book” (223). Steinbeck expected his readers to hate Cathy, and he wrote, “‘while she is a monster, she is a little piece of the monster in all of us’” (Gladstein 33). I believe that is the reason we like her; she is able to be what we cannot. Unlike Cathy, we have the ability to choose between good and evil.

The idea that Cathy embodies a piece of the villain that resides in all of us is unique in the villains of the twentieth century. Earlier villains were meant to show the ills of society or warn audiences against being immoral.

Although the social situation for women did evolve with the progress of the twentieth century, no development compared to the Feminist Movement of the 1970’s. This movement was an effort to help women become equal to men in the workplace. This movement was reflected in every aspect of society, including its literature, in which female characters also underwent drastic evolutions. Our society today, notes Nina Auerbach, sees the “angels of the house” as “soggy dilutions of human complexity” (64). Naturally, the female villain has evolved along with other female characters.

10. Embracing the Intrinsic: Zenia in The Robber Bride

An excellent example of this shift in the way literature portrayed the female villain is The Robber Bride, a novel by Canadian author Margaret Atwood, published in the 1993. In the novel, Atwood updates a classic fairy tale to a modern setting and thus creates a striking novel about the nature of female relationships and identities. The novel
is based on “The Robber Bridegroom,” a story in which the robber of the title lures women to his home in the forest and eats them. While the original tale features a male villain, Atwood chose to reverse his gender, and the robber becomes female (Perrakis 152).

Using a complex set of frames and flashbacks, Atwood tells the story of three very different women joined in friendship by their own catastrophic experiences with the same woman, Zenia. The novel covers three decades of Zenia’s schemes, and ends in the present, when each of the women is again faced with her and is now strong enough to overcome them. The novel is very important in the evolution of the female villain, and shows how a modern, female author chose to create hers.

The first sentence of the novel draws on the history of “evil” women in literature: “The story of Zenia ought to begin where Zenia began. It must have been someplace long ago and distant in space…someplace bruised, and very tangled. A European print…with dusty sunlight and a lot of bushes in it” (Atwood 3). Not only is the villain identified in the very beginning, suggesting the central role she plays, but also Atwood may be alluding to the story of Eve in the Garden of Eden, the earliest record in Western tradition of an “evil” woman. Just as many other female villains have been referred to as serpentine, Zenia too is linked with the earliest female evil.

The novel opens with Zenia’s funeral. Three women, Tony, Charis, and Roz, have gathered to witness the ceremony. Each is haunted by her own experiences, and certainly feels no grief: “Maybe I should have sent flowers, thought Tony. But flowers wouldn’t have been enough, for Zenia…What was needed was a bowl of blood. A bowl
of blood, a bowl of pain, some death. Then maybe she would stay buried” (14). The women meet for lunch a few days later, and are more than shocked when they see Zenia walk in, very much alive. “It’s true she’s as beautiful as ever, but now Tony can detect a slight powdery dullness…a shrinkage, as if some of the juice has been sucked out from under her skin. Tony finds this reassuring: Zenia is mortal after all, like the rest of them” (36). This is not a supernatural woman these women are dealing with, but a woman as human as themselves. Zenia has not returned from the grave either, although the women agree that would not be unlikely for her. Critic Donna Bontatibus suggests that from a Jungian perspective, Zenia’s reemergence is synchronistic. The three women have unconsciously summoned Zenia back because they have unresolved issues with her. Zenia must be present to complete the individuation processes she started (359). She faked her own death, and the women go home to ponder past experiences with Zenia and decide what is to be done. The novel then flashes back to each woman’s original encounter with Zenia, and the reader learns why they have unfinished business with her.

Tony was the first woman to come into contact with Zenia, when the two were in college in the 1960s. Tony was an introverted war history buff with a painful past marked by her mother’s departure when Tony was young. Wild Zenia befriends quiet Tony by telling her own story about a mother who sold her to men. “She does not yet question Zenia’s story, her history; indeed, she uses it to explain her: what can you expect of someone with such a mangled childhood?” (194). When Zenia wants Tony to change to a less “frumpy” image to please men, Tony does not agree that changing herself is
attractive. “‘Listen to me, Antonia,’ says Zenia seriously, ‘All men are warped. This is something you must never forget’ ” (148). Zenia dates Tony’s friend West, and then abandons him. He and Tony develop a relationship after Zenia leaves, but Zenia has wounded West deeply. West cannot see through Zenia as Tony can. He makes excuses to Tony: “‘She’s a deeply scarred person.’ Deeply scarred, thinks Tony. That can’t be anyone’s vocabulary but Zenia’s. West has been hypnotized: it’s Zenia talking, from inside his head” (202). Tony is left to ponder Zenia’s motives: “Maybe she lied and tortured just for the fun of it. Though part of what Tony feels is admiration…there’s a part of her that wanted to cheer Zenia on, even encourage her…To participate in her daring” (204). While the women do not condone Zenia’s actions, they admire her method. They themselves are not strong enough to commit the acts that Zenia does, and perhaps they envy that strength.

Zenia comes to Charis in the 1970s. Charis had a childhood scarred by sexual abuse. As an adult, she lives in an abstract world, believing in the supernatural and occult, and wants to be close to nature. She is in love with Billy, a Vietnam draft-dodger she is harboring: “They both wanted the same thing: for Billy to be happy” (231). Zenia shows up at her door one night with a black eye, cancer, and nowhere else to go, or so she claims. Charis takes Zenia in and cares for her. Zenia works her way into Charis’ sympathy by acting as a victim, telling Charis what West “did” to her: “‘Then he gets angry,’ Zenia goes on. ‘He gets furious with me, and I feel so weak…he hates me to cry, it just gets him angrier…It makes me so ashamed, I feel like I’m the one responsible’ ” (245). Zenia tells Charis that her father, like Charis’, was killed in WWII, and that her
mother was stoned to death – a completely different tale than she told Tony, but towards
the same purpose. Because it is similar to Charis’ own experiences, it succeeds in
gaining Charis’ sympathies. Zenia shocks Charis one day by telling her that she and Billy
have been sleeping together, and tells Charis that Billy doesn’t love her: “‘Come on,
you’re not a baby. He loves your ass. Or some other body part, how would I know?…If
you didn’t put out he’d just take it anyway…Believe me, there’s only one thing a man
ever wants from a woman, and that’s sex’ ” (254). Several days later, Charis wakes up to
find that Zenia and Billy are gone. Tony comes to the rescue, and the two women bond
over shared experiences. “‘But I was so sorry for her!’ says Charis…‘So was I,’ [Tony]
says. ‘She’s an expert at that.’…Tony has thought a lot about Zenia and has decided that
Zenia likes challenges. She likes breaking and entering, and taking things that aren’t hers
” (312-3).

Roz is the third woman to be victimized by Zenia’s wiles. Having helped her two
friends recover from their Zenia experiences, Roz thinks she can handle Zenia when
Zenia comes into her own life. Roz was a Jewish girl raised by nuns while her father was
in Europe, and Roz had always believed he had done dishonest things to profit from the
war. The nuns taught Roz that “the right kind of love should be selfless, for women at
any rate” (333) and Roz adopts this attitude in her adult life. A powerful company
executive, Roz puts up with Mitch, her unfaithful husband. Zenia enters Roz’s life in the
1980’s, and works her way into Roz’s sympathies by using her usual technique. Zenia
tells her that Roz’s father saved Zenia’s life during the war. “Roz hesitates, unwilling to
believe. But this is what she’s longed for always – an eyewitness, someone involved but
impartial, who could assure her that her father really was what he was rumored to be: a hero” (350). Of course, she tells Roz a different story of her childhood than she told to Tony or Charis, but once again it is exactly what Roz wants to hear, and encourages Roz to believe that Zenia has changed: “Then she hears a small voice…right at the back of her head. It’s the voice of experience…Zenia lies, it says…No one would lie about such a thing. It would be too mean” (401). Zenia also tells Roz of her bad experiences with men: “‘Men don’t see you as a person, they see just the body, and so that’s all you see yourself. You think of your body as a tool, something to use’ ” (402). Roz finally sees through Zenia’s schemes when her husband leaves her for Zenia: “What could be crystal clearer? Zenia is a cold and treacherous bitch. She never loved Mitch. All she wanted was the pleasure of winning, of taking him away from Roz” (416).

After telling each of the three women’s stories, the novel returns to the present and the mysterious return of Zenia. All three women are on their guard, knowing Zenia’s capabilities and refusing to fall victim a second time. Each meets with Zenia separately, and each woman is forced to face the realities of her life and the truth about Zenia. Zenia tries to entice each woman once more, and each is able to overcome her schemes. And Zenia finally realizes she has lost. Tony now sees that “Zenia’s suave velvet cloak has dropped away; underneath is raw brutality…Zenia is pure freewheeling malevolence; she wants wreckage, she wants scorched earth, she wants broken glass” (457-8). Zenia can no longer act behind disguises; her true visage has been revealed.

Atwood’s first epigraph by Jessamyn West outlines the major message in the novel: “A rattlesnake that doesn’t bite teaches you nothing.” When a distraught Charis
realizes that not only has Zenia run off with her lover, but has also murdered her pet chickens, Tony tells her, “‘Don’t fret about motives. Attila the Hun didn’t have motives. He just had appetites. She killed them. It speaks for itself’ ” (313). Atwood tells the reader not to look at why Zenia does what she does, but rather to focus on the results of her actions. Zenia tells Tony, “all men are warped.” Although Zenia’s actions have affected West, Tony now understands him and his weaknesses. When Zenia realizes she has not succeeded in convincing Charis to take her in a second time, she tells her, “‘Billy didn’t love you…Wake up! You were a free meal ticket!…he was peddling hash, but I guess that went right past you’ ” (471). As a result of the abuse that Charis received in childhood, she has always responded to other people’s feelings rather than her own. When Charis cares for Zenia, she gains confidence in her own abilities and eventually becomes strong enough to face her past (Perrakis 160-1). Zenia tells Roz, of her husband Mitch, “You always saw him as a victim of women, just putty in their hands…Did it ever occur to you that Mitch was responsible for his actions?” (486). While Charis and Roz blame Zenia for stealing their lovers, Zenia points out that these men made their own choices (Stein 101). Zenia’s methods are devious in intent and cause the protagonists pain; in the end she does them good. She forces all three women out of submissive relationships and causes them to become truer to themselves (Perrakis 152). Tony is a rather passive girl until Zenia comes along. When Zenia deserts her, she is unwilling to revert to her submissive self, and begins to defend what is hers (158). At the end of the novel, Roz thinks, “She feels something else she never thought she would feel, towards Zenia. Oddly enough, it’s gratitude” (Atwood 517).
Like Cathy in *East of Eden*, Zenia is not only the catalyst that allows these changes to occur, but is also a kind of teacher that allows the women to learn the lessons they need (Bontatibus 367). The women learn that if they continue to see themselves as victims, they will remain powerless. They instead take matters into their own hands for constructive personal change (369). Zenia teaches the women to like who they are. All three women think that women need to be inferior to men in order to appear desirable, and Zenia shows them the actual behavior of men they associated with was composed of dishonesty, disloyalty, and violence (Heilman 180). As Becky Sharp frees Amelia’s heart by telling her the truth of the husband she has worshipped for years, Zenia too shows the women that they are better off without the men to which they were attached. If Zenia’s actions are unacceptable, then so are the men’s, and the women learn they must stop accepting such behavior (Heilman 180).

Reminiscing one evening, Roz remembers an incident where Tony read “The Robber Bridegroom” to Roz’s twin daughters. The girls were going through a phase where they wanted every character to be a female. “They opt for women, in every single role…*The Robber Bride*, thinks Roz. Well, why not? Let the grooms take it in the neck for once” (Atwood 327). Perrakis suggests that this is the key to understanding Zenia and the novel: “Women play all the roles – vampire as well as victim – that aggression, power, and neediness, independence and dependence, all belong in Roz’s story” (165). In each protagonist’s final meeting with Zenia, that woman plays all the roles. Each woman is determined not to let Zenia blind her once more, and she will do this using violence if necessary. Zenia, however, as Ann Heilman points out, is not a feminist. She
exploits female friendships as much as she exploits male desires. She is instead a kind of double agent in the war of the sexes (173).

In the novel’s last sentences, Tony ruminates, “Was she in any way like us?…Or, to put it the other way around: Are we in any way like her?” (520). In “opting for women in every single role,” Atwood places a new spin on the nature of female villainy. Zenia is undoubtedly a villain, but while she exhibits deceit and trickery, she also exhibits strength, independence and resourcefulness (Bontatibus 365). Like Becky Sharp – Atwood’s favorite female villain – despite her schemes, Zenia is able to survive “on nothing a year” and on her own. Zenia is independent in ways the three protagonists are not. “Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies?…The Zenias of this world have studied the situation and turned it to their own advantage; they haven’t let themselves be molded into male fantasies…They’ve slipped sideways into dreams, the dreams of women too, because women are fantasies for other women, just as they are for men. But fantasies of a different kind” (Atwood 433-4). The strong yet beautiful woman is an ancient male fantasy, as is evident in works like She. But, as Stein suggests, isn’t this a female fantasy as well? (95). Roz comes to the realization: “…she would like to be somebody else. But not just anyone. Sometimes – for a day at least, or even for an hour….sometimes she would like to be Zenia” (Atwood 435). Each woman desires this ability to be simultaneously beautiful, powerful, daring, outrageous and sexy (Stein 98). Perrakis notes that in the end of the novel, the women choose to celebrate Zenia’s power because they recognize that power is also theirs (167). From a Jungian perspective, Zenia represents the unconscious, dark aspect of the protagonists’ psyches, which includes their
hidden fears and anxieties. It is Zenia’s knowledge of these fears that allow her power over the women (Stein 98). They must recognize and integrate this “shadow self” into their active consciousnesses in order to further their processes of individuation. In other words, they must recognize this dark aspect is a part of them in order to grow. (Bontatibus 360).

“Playing All the Roles”

Towards the end of The Robber Bride, Roz realizes there is no name for Zenia’s villainous nature: “…if she was a guy you’d have to call her a prick. I mean, there is no female name for it, because bitch doesn’t even begin to cover it!” (480). Although clearly women can be just as villainous as men, why aren’t there words to describe them adequately? Around the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the word villain meant a wily woman, not an evil one. A villain has, in a sense, always been female, and society and culture have ascribed a negative connotation to that word and its implications. While there may have been wily, cunning, and intelligent women in literature for hundreds of years, real women in society were not given the freedom to be clever or intelligent. Confined to domestic roles, perhaps they fantasized about being the women they read about, with the freedom to act as they wished, as liberated as their male counterparts.

Bad women in literature have played the villains because there was no other role for them. They could not be protagonists and have their wild, nonconformist actions excused. If a woman were to read about a female character that got away with an evil deed or even lived independently, she might believe that she too could get away with it.
The patriarchy needed to keep women in a subordinate role in order to ensure that its own power remained unchecked. Female villains allowed women to experience something different, namely, what it would be like to be female and to have power, while also warning them of the consequences of villainous behavior.

In *The Robber Bride*, Margaret Atwood realizes that modern women must be both villain and victim in order to fully understand themselves. In real life, there are no true Amelia Sedleys or Cathy Ames Trasks. There can be no true division between the “angel” and the “demon” – for they are two halves of the same woman. It is circumstances that bring out the angel or demon. Throughout the western literary tradition, women have become villains as a result of their positions, their society, and their desire for a different life they were not allowed to have. When a female becomes violent, she is not taking on male characteristics but rather embracing the part of her own character that has been repressed by society. These literary examples show that the villain is in women as much as is the angel. As Ann Heilman states in her study of *The Robber Bride*, “the new generation of women…can be Zenia and their mothers at once because there is no longer any need to choose between victim and villainous positions” (181). Western women are finally able to freely embrace both of their halves equally, and can indulge in either one without being reprimanded by society. Women are no longer barred from artistic creation or societal freedoms. Perhaps it is time for women to reclaim the term “villain” for the more wily aspects of themselves, allowing their fuller, true selves to emerge.
Female villains are enjoyable to read because readers see aspects of themselves within the rebellious characters. These characters are as unpredictable as they are familiar, and perhaps female villains in literature will continue to be labeled as villains until the women who read them are free to embrace that “villain” that lies within themselves.

*Why a villainess? Well, I was sitting around one day and wondering, where have all the Lady Macbeths gone. Gone to Ophelias every one. In other words, for a while in literature you weren’t supposed to have female villains....You were only supposed to have male villains because of the patriarchy...[But] if you aren’t allowed to have any female villains, all the really juicy parts are played by men.*

(Margaret Atwood, “The South Bank Show,” quoted from Heilman 171)
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